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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary  
living.*

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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# Editorial

Evangelicals are in broad agreement as to what the Gospel is, but we are divided on our understanding of the doctrine of the Church. However, this situation is changing. 1983 will be remembered as a year of international conferences—Wheaton '83, Amsterdam '83, Manchester '83, WCC General Assembly. All these gatherings will be grappling directly or indirectly with the issues of the nature and the function of the Church. This year will also be remembered as a year of celebration and reflection on Martin Luther and the roots of the Protestant Reformation.

The Church stands between the proclaimed Word of God and a fallen world and thereby it lives in tension. All tensions lead either to disunity and to self-destruction or to dynamic creativity and unity. Among the rapidly growing churches of the Third World the Church's self-identity is a major issue. People are searching for their roots and they want to know the boundaries of their activities. Therefore the issues of the Church in relation to the Kingdom of God and in relation to the world are crucial. Four areas of identity are important to us. First in relation to God as expressed in our worship and spiritual pilgrimage. Tensions over charismatic gifts either unite or divide churches. Second in relation to the Bible. For some it is the issue of authority and inerrancy; for many it is the hermeneutical one of how we use the Bible to determine our beliefs and practices. Third in relation to the Church. Tensions exist in our understanding of the relationship of function to structures in the Church and in cooperation between churches and para-church agencies. When is a para:church agency a non-church? When does evangelism take priority over social responsibility? Fourthly in relation to the world. There are serious tensions on issues of contextualisation, the Church's growth movement, advocacy of the homogeneous unit principle and the Church's role in social justice. It would be naïve to think that these issues will be solved in 1983 but we do have ears to hear what God's Word through his Spirit is saying to us? This number of *ERT* endeavours to speak to a number of these tensions and point to the need of both theological reformation and spiritual revival in the Church. [p. 192](#)

## The Biblical Basis of the Para-Church Movements

A. W. Swamidoss

*Reprinted from Faculty Seminar Papers 1981–82, Vol. 1, Union  
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*The relationship of churches and para-church agencies in the task of world evangelisation emerged as an important issue at COWE, Pattayya in 1980. It will be a major issue at the Wheaton '83 conference as it grapples with the nature and mission of the Church in the wider dimensions of the Church's life and ministry.*

*In this article a New Testament scholar from India (where the issues of Church and para-church are now extremely acute) looks for exegetical answers. Some will be helped by this*

*article, others may not be, which fact is itself a reflection on the confusion and complexity of our present situation. For example, it is estimated that there are 10,000 para-church agencies in North America alone. Many now have satellites in the Third World. Indigenous para-church agencies are also mushrooming in most Third World countries. Is this phenomenon building the Church or destroying the Church? Perhaps that is asking the wrong question.*

*This article directly or indirectly raises issues including the following:*

*Are local churches and para-church agencies both expressions of the Universal Church?*

*How far can we correlate the present phenomena with the prototypes of the New Testament era?*

*When is a para-church agency non-church?*

*Is there biblical evidence for restricting the administering of the sacraments and the ordaining of ministers to Church structures?*

*Does the New Testament permit the development of valid structures not found in the New Testament Church?*

*In defining the nature and function of the Church can we isolate this Church as an organism from the institutes of the Church?*

*How important are accountability and discipline in defining the nature and mission of both Church and para-church agencies?*

*Can criteria be developed to test when a para-church agency is 'alongside' the Church and when it is 'in place of' the Church?*

(Editor)

Down through the centuries in the history of Christianity two ecclesiastical structures have existed—the local church structure and the para-church structure. Some church leaders question the very [p. 193](#) existence of para-church movements while some others approve of their legitimacy but assert that they ought to play a secondary role and suggest mutual co-existence. Some para-church organisations assert their right to exist and strive for a mutual co-existence, while some others either withdraw quietly or show their resentment by a 'don't care' attitude. The tension between the two structures is very visible. The purpose of this paper is to find out whether there is any biblical basis for the existence of para-church movements.

## **THE STRUCTURES OF CHURCH AND PARA-CHURCH**

Let us divide the subject into two categories—structure and theology. That is, let us find out what the Bible says first about the two structures and then about the theology of the Church. In doing the latter we need to find out the relationship of the local church and the para-church between themselves and the relationship between them and the universal church.

## **PROPHETIC RENEWAL OF THE CULTIC**

The proper place to begin with is the Old Testament. The worship system in Israel was established even from the time of Moses. The Books of Chronicles tell us how elaborate the system was at a later time with Levites, the singing and all the ritual. The cultus had a definite place in the life of Israel. Religion in Israel meant the cult with all its ramifications. For all practical purposes the community was governed by this. However, when the cult became stale and routine and when spiritual numbness set in and when a gulf between the priest and the laity was seen, Yahweh raised up the prophetic movement. The

prophets pronounced things with the formula 'Thus says the Lord'; they condemned the cult yet lived within it. This is analogous to the para-church movements.

This needs to be given serious thought. The prophetic movements appeared in Israel and performed a specific function when the cult needed revival. The cult was the established order and continued throughout Old Testament times. Whenever the established order failed a charismatic movement started. The question here is not which one is superior. Rather, it is this: Did the prophetic movement have a role to play and was it authorised by God? Both existed simultaneously and the prophets claimed a direct touch with God. God was concerned with the need of the times and met those needs. p. 194

## PROTO-TYPES OF CHURCH STRUCTURES

Let us look at the New Testament. Do we see a parallel picture there? Here the apostles are the prominent leaders. When the church is born it is these who give leadership. In the Acts of the Apostles Peter wins Jewish converts and a community is born and similarly Paul establishes communities in many places comprising mainly Gentiles. Is there anything here which we can call para-church structure?

In connection with the death of Ananias and Saphira, Acts records that great fear came upon the whole church ([5:11](#)). By 'church' probably the Jerusalem congregation is meant. Similarly in [Acts 6:3](#) the twelve acted in an official capacity and made arrangements for the appointment of the seven to take care of the daily distribution. In [8:14f](#) again the apostles of Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to find out what was happening. In [9:26-30](#) when Paul made an attempt to join the disciples at Jerusalem there was some hesitation in accepting him. Here again, Luke implies that the hesitation was from the church body. When Peter visited Cornelius and preached Christ to him his action was called in question by Jerusalem authorities in an official capacity ([Acts 11:2, 18](#)). Similarly [11:30](#) reports that the disciples in Antioch sent their relief fund to Jerusalem and this was delivered to the elders. When Antioch received the word of the Lord, the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas there ([11:22](#)) as it sent Peter and John to Samaria. Then the church in Antioch sent off Paul and Barnabas for the missionary task. Later a dispute arose concerning circumcision of the Gentile Christians and Paul and Barnabas were deputed by the Antioch church to the Jerusalem church ([15:3f](#)) to discuss the matter.

On all these occasions the church acts as body, as it were. Specific details about the ecclesiastical government of the church at Jerusalem or Antioch are not known. However, the prototype of a church structure is seen.

## PROTO-TYPES OF PARA-CHURCH STRUCTURES

Is there any proto-type of a para-church structure? In other words, was there any activity outside this church 'structure'? When persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the region of Judea and Samaria ([Acts 8:1](#)). They preached the word wherever they went. Some of them travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Some men from Cyprus and Cyrene brought the word to the Greeks in Antioch ([11:19-21](#)). P. 195

Is this not a proto-type of the para-church structure? The church in Jerusalem did not depute anyone to go and engage in evangelistic activities. Yet the word of God was preached in Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. People preached the word of God wherever they went without any directive from the church ([8:4](#)). Philip, one of the seven appointed along with Stephen went to a city of Samaria and preached the gospel. Philip was not sent in an official capacity (cf. [21:8](#)). Nor was he one of the Twelve. One thing is

very clear. Along with the apostolic activity of Peter ([Acts 10](#), [11:1–18](#)) there was a simultaneous preaching activity by non-apostles, a sort of voluntary missionary movement.

The activity of Philip in chapter [8](#) and of the scattered Hellenists in chapter [11:19ff.](#) is clearly a proto-type for the para-church movements since these efforts were not from 'within' the official circles of the Jerusalem church. An objection may be raised: were they not members of the Jerusalem church? They did belong to the mother church, but their evangelistic mission was voluntary and not by the directive of the mother church. This is precisely the point. On these two occasions the Jerusalem apostles sent their representatives to consolidate the efforts made by others. In fact [Acts 8:25](#) makes this plain: Peter and John the official representatives of the Jerusalem church strengthened the disciples in Samaria and returned to Jerusalem and on their way back preached the gospel to many Samaritan villagers. This is an official mission in contrast to the mission undertaken by Philip. Similarly we may contrast the activity of Barnabas and the scattered believers in [Acts 11:19ff.](#)

It is particularly noteworthy that the church structure did not find fault with those who brought the word, Philip to Samaria ([8:14](#)) and the scattered believers to Antioch ([11:22](#)). This is noteworthy because the church called into question the activity of Peter ([11:12](#), [18](#)) for having fellowship with the Gentiles which to them was not yet a settled theological issue at that time.

Similarly when Paul was deputed for missions by the church at Antioch there were other efforts going on. When Paul and Barnabas separated two teams came into existence! Barnabas and Mark went off to Cyprus. Mark was still doing ministry (cf. [Col. 4:10](#); [Philm v. 23](#); [II Tim. 4:11](#)). The team of Barnabas was non-official.<sup>1</sup>

Another Christian worker named Apollos came from Alexandria to Ephesus and ministered there ([Acts 18:24–28](#)). He came of his own accord as a travelling evangelist. After receiving some more exposition [p. 196](#) of the scriptures from Priscilla and Aquilla he travelled on to Corinth. He got a letter of introduction to Corinth. These are proto-types of structures which are independent of the church structure in the early church.

This is also seen from the second and third epistles of John. There was travelling missionaries who went from place to place preaching the gospel. In [II John 10, 11](#), the evangelist cautions his friends about those who bring wrong doctrine and in [III John 6, 7](#) he wants kindness to be shown to Christian missionaries.

In the Pastoral epistles the qualifications of the church leaders are spelled out. Also, the author is condemning heretical teachings. Even in this context where church structure was getting established and where heresies were condemned vigorously there is no explicit negative reference to independent preaching activities.

Let us come back to Paul. He was deputed by the church at Antioch to the missionary tour. Does Luke mean that this was the normative pattern in the early church? It does not appear so, because the church at Jerusalem did not have any such commissioning service. Also, the church at Antioch itself was established by a para-church structure. If we take the church at Antioch as a pattern we must go a little further and take the pattern of the structure which established this church. The role of the church at Antioch in sending out Paul and Barnabas was a historical detail which Luke wanted to record.

Was Paul deputed by the Antioch church for all his three missionary journeys? For the first one he was. But for the second one he took the decision and it seems that the church approved his decision ([Acts 15:40](#)). Paul started off his third journey on his own. This is seen from [18:23](#) and [21:15, 17](#). He went back to Jerusalem and not to Antioch. When once

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<sup>1</sup> See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p.319.

the travel began he was on his own. He was not directly controlled by Antioch. This must put us in caution. When it comes to the structure of the church Paul himself acted as though he were the proto-type of a para-church structure. He can drop people at his will; add people to his company; go to places of his own choice; send emissaries to other churches; write letters; and take decisions on his own—all this not under the directive of Antioch.

[Acts 15:41](#) reports that Paul took Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches. But there is no reference in Acts for pioneering work in this area. In view of [Galatians 1:21](#) it is possible that Paul did the pioneering work before he was introduced to Antioch by Barnabas (cf. [Acts 11:25](#)).<sup>2</sup> If this is so before his deputation by Antioch p. 197 he had begun his independent missionary activities. Ralph Winter rightly places Paul in both categories:

He (Paul) was, true enough, sent out by the church in Antioch. But once away from Antioch he seemed very much on his own. The little team he formed was economically self-sufficient when occasion demanded. It was also dependent, but upon other churches that had risen as a result of evangelistic labours. Paul's team may certainly be considered a structure.<sup>3</sup>

That Paul was on his own as though a para-church structure rested in himself and the party, and was not controlled by Antioch, is confirmed by his own writings. He seldom makes any reference to his being sent by Antioch. In fact, the opposite is true. In Galatians he declares very emphatically that his gospel is directly from God. In [Galatians 2:9](#) he makes a reference that the pillars of the Jerusalem church James, Cephas, and John approved of his and Barnabas's going to the Gentiles. This meeting ([Gal. 2:1](#)) is probably the one reported in [Acts 11:30](#). It is strange that Paul is not referring to his Antioch connection in the context of [Galatians 2:9](#). It is worth noting that Paul is very much independent.

We do not know when and how the church of Rome got established. Scholars trace its origin to a time soon after Pentecost giving credit to the visitors from there, both Jews and Proselytes ([Acts 2:10](#)).<sup>4</sup> Is this then a church-sponsored mission? The same may hold good for Christianity in Alexandria.

## PROTO-TYPES FOR PRESENT DAY STRUCTURES

Can independent movements be called proto-types for present day para-church movements? Yes, they can be. For our present-day local churches the congregations mentioned in the New Testament are considered as the model, for example, the church at Thessalonica, Philippi etc. These are only proto-types for our present-day churches in that the latter is not an exact replica of the former. The theological problem of the delay of the Parousia at Thessalonica is not a problem in our local congregations nor are the heretics of our day the same as those at Philippi.

The concept of local church structure is not the only one that was always in focus in the New Testament. There is an inter-relationship between the churches. The Jerusalem church was interested in the conversions at Samaria and Antioch. The Jerusalem council

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<sup>2</sup> E. F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church*, p.244.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Two structures of God's Redemptive Mission', p.129. See also the work by R. Winter and R. P. Beaver, *The Warp and the Woof: Organizing for Missing*, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> R. Winter and R. P. Beaver, *The Warp and Woof*. p.63.



sent p. 198 letters to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. The church at Antioch ([Acts 11:27–30](#)) was concerned with the financial crisis of the church at Jerusalem and sent in a famine relief fund. Paul's letter to the Galatians is addressed not to one church but to the churches of Galatia, which probably meant the churches he established during his first journey as the South Galatian theory puts forward. In [Colossians 4:16](#) Paul wants the church to pass on his letter to the church of the Laodiceans and wants the members to read the letter from Laodicea. The epistle to the Ephesians where Paul gives his magnificent treatise on the Church is not just a letter to the church at Ephesus. The best manuscripts lack Ephesus in the address in [1:1](#). This letter was probably a circular letter. Paul pleads very strongly and persuasively with the Corinthians for the relief fund to the poor saints in Jerusalem ([II Cor. 8, 9](#)). The major advantage of the present denominational structure is that the individual congregations try to relate to each other, thereby providing a stronger witness for the gospel and promoting mutual upbuilding among themselves. Probably the church at Jerusalem was the proto-type for our denominational structure.

For the present day ecclesiastical functions too, only the proto-type is available. In the Pastorals the church office gets prominence. The church is inevitably moving towards an institutionalized structure. The term 'early catholicism' is very common in New Testament scholarship.<sup>5</sup> It is alleged that Luke-Acts, Pastorals, Ephesians, and II Peter-Jude exhibit some sort of a 'Catholic' tendency. The notion that church is an institution with a certain kind of people exercising leadership functions is seen in an embryo form within the New Testament literature itself.

When we can refer to a proto-type for local church structure, denominational structure, and the office of ministry there is nothing wrong in calling the independent movements of the New Testament days the proto-type for the present day para-church movements.

Ralph Winter introduces two words from anthropology which bring out the concepts clearly—modality and sodality. The church structures are modalities in which the members span the whole age-sex spectrum of the normal human community. Another example for this would be the state and the local governments. Sodalities are fellowship groups which is different from modalities in the age-sex spectrum of the members.<sup>6</sup> This is a good differentiation. Paul and his p. 199 team was a sodality which was not necessarily under the direction of the modality as we saw already. Those who brought the gospel to Samaria and Antioch and the itinerant preachers can be classified in the sodality category.

At this point we must consider these two structures from a pragmatic point of view. It is pointed out that para-church structures depend on local church structures for personnel, finance, sacraments, and, if it is a mission agency, to hand down the planted churches. Thus it is derived that the local church structure is superior to the para-church structure.

This is a right observation but the implications drawn are not correct. All para-church leaders are members of some local churches. Financial support for their ministry is raised within the local churches. How does this imply superiority? If the universal church is one having two valid structures any member can take part in both structures. Paul was involved in both structures. So were the Hellenists who preached the gospel to the Gentiles. That the para-church leaders are members of local churches does not elevate the latter. It simply means that there are some believers who serve in both structures.

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<sup>5</sup> See F. Kasemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*. For a healthy reaction see I. H. Marshall, 'Early Catholicism in the New Testament', in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*. pp.217–231.

<sup>6</sup> R. Winter and R. P. Beaver, *The Warp and Woof*, pp.55f.



Is raising support for the ministry of a para-church organisation in any way robbing the local church? Or does this fact make the para-church dependent on the local church and thereby make it inferior? Here again it must be remembered that the Church is one. All are primarily members of the universal church and all money belongs to God. If the para-church structure is biblically valid how can one structure claim that all money should come only into its structure? There are two issues—the individual's freedom in the use of his tithes and offerings and the organisation's right to demand. In the early church, support for ministry was seldom demanded: In Jerusalem Peter did not force all believers to sell their property and bring the money to the common pool. It was done voluntarily. When Paul pleaded for help for the poor saints in Jerusalem from his Gentile converts at Achaia they were never forced. Similarly he never demanded any support for himself ([Acts 20:34](#)) but received voluntary gifts ([Phil. 4:20; 4:10–20](#)). The principle here is that any structure should depend only upon voluntary support for ministry.

## II THE THEOLOGY OF CHURCH AND PARA-CHURCH

We have been discussing the structure of the church. Now we must turn our attention to the *being* or the nature of the church. What exactly do we mean by the concept 'church'?  
**P. 200**

Let us look at the theology of the church. Consider [Matthew 18:20](#): 'For where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them.' This occurs in the context of church discipline. There is a three-stage programme to correct an erring brother. First, to talk it out directly with him. Secondly, to talk it out with him in the presence of two or three witnesses and thirdly, to talk it out to the church. Whatever decision the church takes will be ratified by God in heaven. God honours the agreement of even two and the presence of Christ is there even if it be two or three. In the early church situation this refers to the presence of Christ in the worship services, and thus in prayer time in general.

What is meant by 'church' here? We must take a second look at the procedure. A problem is brought to the church—a decision is taken—it is ratified by God—God honours the agreement of even two—Christ is present in the midst of even such a very small company. To understand what is meant by 'church' in this context we have to reverse the whole process. The presence of Christ is in the midst of any company gathered in his name—God honours their prayer and decision—their decision concerning an erring brother is binding—'if there is any like this bring him before this body, the church'.<sup>9</sup> The implication is very clear. Jesus is present even in small congregations or prayer meetings or Bible study groups.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, any company, be it two or three, gathered in the name of Christ constitutes the church. This body is an expression of the Church universal. For all practical purposes this becomes the local church. Thus para-church which is primarily a fellowship of believers united together by virtue of a common cause is another form of a local church.

On the other hand, if we say that the saying is to establish the authority of the local churches our exegesis is incomplete since we are not probing into what constitutes the local church. If we say that the saying refers to Christ's presence during prayer, then we are taking the saying out of context. **p. 201**

Thus [Matthew 18:20](#) does not envisage any difference between the local church and the para-church. We need to consider now what exactly is the meaning of the term church.

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<sup>9</sup> See D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 276f. His exegesis does not take verses 19 and 20 out of the context of church discipline. See also C.H. Dodd, *New Testament Studies*, pp.58f.

<sup>10</sup> See W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol, II, p.191.

It is often said that Jesus did not wish to establish any community but the followers started the organization. Thus [Matthew 16:17–19](#) and [18:15–20](#) where the sayings of Jesus concerning the church occur are considered unauthentic. This is not the place to discuss authenticity. However, it has been defended well.<sup>11</sup> It cannot be denied that Jesus was conscious of a Messianic community.

In [Matthew 16:18](#) Jesus says that he will build his church on Peter, the rock. There is a word play in the use of the two words, ‘Peter’ and ‘rock’, each having the same meaning in Greek or in Aramaic. Matthew has included this saying in the context of the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus tells Peter that the basis of the confession is God’s revelation to him. Clearly there is an elevation of Peter in this periscope. He is considered the foundation-rock on which the church is built. However, we must note that there is no reference to the succession of Peter in this section. Undoubtedly Peter was one of the apostles on whom the beginnings of the Church lay and this pericope highlights this fact. [Ephesians 2:20](#) tells us that the church is built ‘upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone’. From the book of Acts it is clear that Peter was chronologically the first in fulfilling the role of a church builder.

The Septuagint uses *ekklesia* for the Hebrew word *qahal* meaning the congregation of Israel. This is the word used in [Matthew 16:18](#) and [18:17](#). Most probably, then, *ekklesia* refers to the people of God. This people are of a special kind by virtue of their relationship to Jesus since he refers to them as ‘my *ekklesia*’. They belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to them. This probably was the concept in its embryo form of the later congregations in the apostolic period. However, *ekklesia* can also mean the gathering or assembly of the people owing to the building metaphor used by our Lord.<sup>12</sup> Thus [Matthew 16](#) spells out that Peter was one of the founders of the church and [Matthew 18](#) spells out that two or three gathered in the name of Christ is a local church.

In the Gospel according to John there is no explicit reference to the word *ekklesia* but the Christian Community is referred to in many places ([10:16](#); [17:20, 21](#)). The community in John is primarily an organism and not an organization. The shepherd allegory in chapter [p. 202 10](#) and the vine allegory in chapter [15](#) bring this out clearly. The unity of the community is in focus in chapter [17](#). Any idea of ‘church’ in John is clearly referring to the universal church and not to any local congregation.

Paul uses the term *ekklesia* to mean both local congregations, for example, [Galatians 1:2](#) ‘to the churches of Galatia’ and to a body which transcends geographical or linguistic boundaries, for example, [Galatians 1:13](#), ‘I persecuted the church of God violently’. In the second sense it is the totality or the unity comprising all believers.

This second sense is seen more clearly in Ephesians and Colossians. It is identified as the body of Christ ([Col. 1:18, 24](#); [Eph. 1:23](#)). Here the word *ekklesia* is used in a catholic, i.e. all-comprising sense transcending the local congregation. Hence the term universal church. The implication is clear—the church is more than any local congregation. Christ is the head of the church, his body, and the church is subject to Christ ([Eph. 5:23f.](#)) Also, the church is Christ’s building ([2:20–22](#)) and Christ’s bride ([5:25ff.](#)). It is the people of God ([Rom. 9:25f.](#); [1 Pet. 1:9f.](#)). In all these references in Ephesians ([1:22](#); [3:10, 21](#); [5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32](#)) the term *ekklesia* is used in the universal sense and it means ‘the universal Church within which are included all individual churches and which is at the same time

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<sup>11</sup> See O. Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, and D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p.710f. Cullmann thinks that the saying is authentic but is dislocated.

<sup>12</sup> See D. Guthrie. *N.T. Theology*, p.712.

something more than the aggregation of the parts'.<sup>13</sup> It involves the relationship of an individual to God and to other such individuals, many of whom he might not have met physically but who are in the body by virtue of the same relationship which they have with Christ. The idea that Christ is the head adds this new dimension to it. There is a solidarity of all those who believe in Christ. All local churches belong to one another because they jointly belong to Christ. No one stands alone and 'Christians are the body and limbs of Christ'.<sup>14</sup> Every believer is a vital part in constituting the organism called the Church Universal. When two or three such members gather together, be it in the form of a local church or a para-church, they are expressions of the church universal.

This body, the universal church, established by Christ is continuous in that it exists through generations. This transcends the time boundary, linguistic and national boundaries. A lonely pioneering missionary who does not have a local church to fellowship with or a man who received the gospel on his death bed and thus is not part of any local church both belong to the universal Church. Thus the p. 203 universal Church transcends the limits of the local church. It has a metaphysical dimension to it.

## TWO MANIFESTATIONS OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Are the universal and the local church one and the same? Not exactly. The local church is not the universal church in the sense that it is not identical with it. However, there exists a very close relationship between the two. The local church represents the universal church. This is seen from [Acts 20:28](#). K. L. Schmidt writes, 'each community, however small, represents the total community of the church'.<sup>15</sup> This is little more than saying that the local church is a part of the universal Church. G. E. Ladd summarises the relationship clearly:

The local church is not part of the church but is the church in the local expression. This means that the whole power of Christ is available to every local congregation, that each congregation functions in its community as the universal church functions in the world as a whole, and that the local congregation is no isolated group but stands in a state of solidarity with the church as a whole.<sup>16</sup>

If this is the concept of the church, then is there any difference between the local church and a para-church? Definitely not. The local church is an assembly of believers. So is any para-church. Paul refers to churches meeting in houses. Some churches consisted of a number of such house-groups. When the word *ekklesia* is used of the total number of believers in a given place, the groups often consisted of a number of associated house-fellowships (cf. [Rom. 16:1](#); [Col. 4:16](#); [Gal. 1:22](#); Philem. v.2).<sup>17</sup> For all practical purposes these are equal to para-churches.

In the New Testament there is no dichotomy of the church as local church and para-church. Any body of believers is addressed as church. In form and function the local church and para-church differ. But in their nature or status both are same. Both are local expressions of the Universal Church. This is the justification or biblical basis for certain

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<sup>13</sup> C. L. Mitton, *Ephesians*, p.75. See this commentary on the verses quoted here from Ephesians.

<sup>14</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians and Philemon*, p.6

<sup>15</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III, p.506.

<sup>16</sup> *A Theology of the New Testament*, p.353.

<sup>17</sup> See D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p.744.

para-church movements which have become local churches and have developed into denominations. In any theology of the church we must note the difference between the function and the status of the church. Also, the distinction between local church and universal church must be kept clear. p. 204

### **Sacraments and Ordained Ministry in the Theology of the Church**

There is a difference between the church and para-church structure. The local church administers sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, through ordained ministry whereas the para-church does not do so. Does the administration of sacraments and the category of ordained ministry belong to the status or the function of the church? At this point the N.T. evidence must be taken very seriously. In the N.T. do we see any evidence for the fact that the administration of the sacraments belongs to the realm of the status of the church? Ephesians and Colossians, where we see Paul's unique delineation of the concept of 'church', do not include this connotation. Neither do the imageries 'people of God', 'the body of Christ', 'the bride of the Lord' convey the notion that sacraments denote the *ontic* nature of the church. In [1 Corinthians 11:17-24](#) where Paul gives injunctions concerning order in celebrating the Lord's Supper he does not indicate that this belongs to the essence of the church. Neither do we see this in the synoptic account where the Lord instituted this, while celebrating the last passover meal with the disciples. In the Book of Acts 'breaking the bread' is an act in which the believers participated, ([2:42](#) and [20:7-12](#)) where Paul himself took part along with a small company of friends. We do not see any reference to the nature of the church here.

This holds good for the rite of Baptism too. Philip the evangelist baptized the Ethiopian officer ([Acts 8](#)). The Philippian jailor was baptized ([Acts 16](#)). In connection with Peter's evangelistic activities there were baptisms ([Acts 2](#) and [10](#)). Nowhere do we see that baptism was associated with the nature of the church. When Paul deals with the theology of Baptism ([Rom. 6:3-5](#); [1 Cor. 12:13](#); [Col. 2:11](#) f.) he does not indicate that this belongs to the essence of the church.

Later in the Pastoral epistles when church structure developed, there is no specific link of the sacrament of baptism or the Lord's Supper with the ontology of the church. In [Ephesians 4:4f.](#) there is reference to one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. The stress here is the underlying unity among the believers as in these various aspects. Church and baptism are not linked ontologically. Strangely, reference to the Lord's Supper is missing in these two verses. Thus administering the two sacraments, baptism and Lord's Supper, belongs to the realm of the functions of the local church.

Does the concept of ministry, the practice of an ordained person administering the sacraments, belong to the essence of the church? This practice is a later development. For example, there is no explicit mention that only the apostles baptized the three thousand men nor p. 205 that only they presided while breaking the bread ([Acts 2:42](#)). Philip the evangelist who baptized the Ethiopian officer was not an apostle. In [1 Corinthians 11:18](#) Paul refers to the church having assembled for celebrating the Lord's Supper. There is no specific reference to a person set apart for administering this sacrament either in this section or in the whole epistle. Church leadership was corporate during this time. That the sacrament were administered in the local churches by ministers set apart for the same was a necessary historical development as early as the beginning of the second century.

In the Pastorals we do see church office and church structure in a developed form. Nevertheless, the development is only in ecclesiastical structure, i.e., church government and personnel. This development is a development in the function of the church. There is no suggestion that this belongs to the Being of the church. G. E. Ladd writes, 'the

organizational structure of the church is no essential element in the theology of the church'.<sup>18</sup> Again ordained ministry, like the administration of the sacraments, belongs to the function of the church and does not belong to the status of the church.

In saying that the sacraments and ordained ministry belong to the function of the church we are not minimizing their value. Indeed these are unique functions: sacraments were ordained by Jesus and as such they were distinctives of the Christian community over against the Jewish community. A proto-type for ordained ministry is seen in the book of Acts and the pastoral epistles. However, there is no suggestion that only the local churches were entitled to celebrate the Lord's Supper and administer Baptism. These were ordinances given to the universal Church and the local structure took care of them. Similarly in Acts and the Pastoral epistles we also see a proto-type for lay ministry and thus any superiority of the ordained ministry is ruled out. There is no evidence in the New Testament for dichotomising the office of ministry as 'ordained ministry' and 'lay ministry'.

In mission situations when para-church structures plant congregations usually they hand over these to local churches for shepherding. Does this mean that one structure is subservient to another? Not necessarily so. It must be pointed out that some such agencies have developed into separate local churches and denominations without handing over the planted congregations to already established local churches. Instead of viewing the situation as one superior to the other we ought to view that one structure complements the other. This will help build the kingdom of God. p. 206

There is a popular saying that para-church is an arm of the church. This is a cliché. Para-church is an arm of the universal church and not of the local church. It is alleged that the local churches can do all the ministries of the para-churches but the para-churches cannot do so since sacraments and ordained ministry belong only to the local churches. This is only a superficial assessment of the situation. Para-churches do become local churches and denominations if they choose to. So in the final analysis this difference does not mean superiority of one over the other. Thus while it appears that the para-church is an arm of the local church in reality it is not.

### Conclusion

We can conclude that the Church is one and has two valid structures. These structures should complement each other. In practice the life of many local churches does not confirm with the definition of church as the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers, or the eschatological community. Thus, theologically, while the local church expresses the universal church practically that expression is so negative that non-Christians shun becoming part of this community. The same can be said of the para-church agencies also. In structure and in the life of the members these too may lack vitality and Christian character. All the politics and motives of its members can be seen here as they are seen in the local churches. Both are in need of constant reformation. The challenge before the local churches and the para-church agencies is to make their members live under the authority of the word and in accordance with the word.

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**Dr. A.W. Swamidoss is Director of Post-Graduate Studies at the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune (formerly Yavatmal), India. p. 207**

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<sup>18</sup> *A Theology of the New Testament*, p.534.



# Some Theses for the Spiritual Renewal and Revival of Theology, The Church and World-Responsibility

Rev. Volkhard Scheunemann

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Sunand Sumithra, with permission.*

*These theses were not written in a systematic academic manner, but have been developed during a period of ten years' missionary work, when the author could look at his own European culture from a distance. From this perspective, he realized the seriousness of the spiritual state of his own people. Though the theses are primarily relevant to Europe, they are equally applicable to other countries where the Church, under the constant threat of materialism and secularism, is in dire need of spiritual renewal. They complement the foregoing theological discussion by Dr. Swamidoss with a needed pastoral and prophetic caring of the Church.*

*Sometimes the expressions are exaggerated, but the relevance of the truth they contain can by no means be underestimated. The author appeals beyond the method of scientific analogies to a spiritual interpretation of the Bible. Some Bible references have been omitted.  
(Editor)*

## I. CONCERNING THE OVERCOMING OF THIS-WORLD-ORIENTATED AND MATERIALISTIC THINKING

1. Spiritual renewal and revival are God's gracious shocking of man out of his spiritual bondage and death. It is a liberation of man, made possible by God himself, out of his spiritual insensitivity and intellectual erring and confusion which he has brought upon himself.

2. Modern man needs a change of emphasis from matter to spirit, from the visible to the invisible, from the autonomously rational to the spiritual, from self-confidence to God-confidence; this is the only way for out of the curse into blessing and out of spiritual adultery, by which all the other lapses have been caused.

3. Just as the book of Romans was resorted to at the time of the Reformation, so in our time the book of Hebrews must be resorted to, to restore the meaning of faith, as found in [Hebrews 11](#).

4. According to the Scriptures, the earthly visible world is made from the invisible spiritual word. Hence, the spiritual has primacy over the material. [p. 208](#)

5. Just as the sun is the source of light for the earth, so is Jesus Christ the source of light for the world ([John 8:12](#)). The divine light was there even before the earthly light came into being and will continue to exist even when the sunlight is quenched.

6. Jesus is the source of life. Biological life in all its richness is only a symbol of it.

7. Jesus is the source of time; he is the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end; the earthly time is created, it is only an image of eternity.

8. Man too is only an image, a mirror and a container, not the source of life ([Gen. 1:26](#)).

9. It is this great lie, to replace brightness with darkness, the original with the image, the source with the container which opened the way for the European man into a



materialistic, this-world-orientedness, threw him back into a deep new paganism, made him a puppet of demonic inspiration and chained him to a self-destroying idolatry so that he served and honoured the creature rather than the Creator who is to be praised for ever. ([Rom. 1:24–25](#)).

10. Such a belief in this worldliness is an essential characteristic of the contemporary European man which makes the people of Asia and the Third World shake their heads in wonder.

11. Behind the veiling of the spiritual by the material is the attempt of fallen man to define, and hence have access to, the glory of the indestructible God, so that he eventually exchanged the indestructible, eternal source of all things for an image, an illusion, and his God-view was transformed into a picture (through the application of the principle of analogy) of God according to the understanding of man.

12. This *first great lie* is the watershed of all concepts of God both in ancient and modern theologies and worldviews in which the fallen man creates God according to his own image.

13. The shaming of the body and the loss of human worth was already to be seen in those perverted theologies and religions which transformed God's truth into a lie.

14. The devaluation of man on the basis of a faith in evolution and the categorization of a man as a mere consumer on the basis of a materialistic and ideological manipulation, has opened the way to anti-Christ. Anti-Christ is the one who has vegetated to the level of an animal and hence, as Revelation says, is a beast out of the earth.

15. Winning back the lost spiritual dimension by way of repentance and conversion has an inevitable precondition namely, a renewed sensitivity to the spiritual realm, even if it should be quickened through the coming of eastern religion and cults. [p. 209](#)

16. The fallen man who is choked in the lie of material, earthly superiority unconditionally needs an encounter with Jesus, the only Spirit-born and the living one who alone can bring a spiritual revival.

17. Just as the Son is the glory of the Father, so also may man again become the glory of the Son of man.

18. Only through the contact of the spiritual world in faith and only through the indwelling of the spirit of Jesus in our spirit by way of repentance, conversion and new birth can we take part in the movement from above. Only in this way is the fulfilment or the realization of the meaning of life possible.

19. True theology can be done only by those who have been caught up in this movement from above, who are sent; God gives such his spirit without measure.

20. Only the lamb which takes away the sin of the world (including the sin of the fall, and of the idolatry and of the demonic fall of modern man) is the centre of all things, yesterday, today and for ever. All sources are in him. But outside are the idolatrous, and everyone who loves the lie and does it.

## **II CONCERNING THE RENEWAL OF THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION. (PS. 126:1 & 4)**

21. When our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ says 'repent', he means that our total life including our thinking should be a permanent repentance and permanent transformation.

22. Human reason/thinking excludes repentance and hence rejects the seriousness of sin and of the fall, but emphasises so-called intellectual integrity as a possible good work (paganism, idealism).

23. An exclusion of repentance from human thinking rejects and therefore also nullifies the Cross of Jesus as the end of all such human integrity in doing and willing, and especially in thinking; for, before the Cross of Jesus all human honesty is exposed as a lie.

24. An exclusion of repentance from human thinking has thrown Europe into terrible idolatry and the worship of the intellect, as well as of scientific technological discoveries and inventions. Eventually, this leads to the worship of man himself.

25. Every form of idolatry has an occultic background. That is why repentance in thinking is necessary, for it denies and releases man from the spirit of lie.

26. According to [1 Timothy 3:16](#), He who is revealed in the flesh can be justified only in Spirit and not through scientific research, for spiritual things are to be judged only in *Spirit*. That is the only legitimate p. 210 and hence sufficient approach to the understanding of the Scriptures. Everything else is only a trespass, or just a religious activity according to one's own imagination.

27. It is this attempt to justify the revealed one scientifically, that is, in the way of the flesh, which has brought Europe into a terrible state: justification by works in thinking. Because of this, the cardinal principle of *Solus Christus, totus Christus* and finally also *sola gratia* have been sold for the cheap coins of scientific recognition.

28. Through a false understanding both of revelation and incarnation (as if the One who was revealed in flesh ceases to be '*logos*' and '*kurios*', and therefore he is now to be grasped or thrown away in fleshly thinking), the mystery of evangelium is betrayed.

29. The secrets of the kingdom of God are not accessible to anyone and everyone, but only to those who are in Him, and who love Him.

30. The attempt to justify Jesus scientifically (in flesh) has, since the 18th century, led numerous theological treatises as well as unnumbered New Testament and Old Testament studies to terrible mythological imaginations.

31. In [1 Timothy 4:7](#), the essence of myth is represented as '*bebēlous*' which is accessible to everyone, is unspiritual, profane and desacralizing as well as *graōdeis*, that is fables, superstitions and madness.

32. He who has lost his basis in God resorts to such myths, ideologies and superstitions. The Scriptures demand that such myths, and the superstitions of the historical critical method be exposed as useless and twisted. It does not mean that today we must go back to the prehistorical critical research methods, but that this method is inadequate and unsuitable and hence to be given up for the study of the Scriptures. Christ himself and his Spirit will be the door to the right understanding of the Scriptures, but no other human methods can do that job.

33. Every theological work which does not go through the door, Jesus Christ, robs and steals what belongs to Jesus. It is to be blamed for the condition of the churches; but the sheep do not hear the voices.

34. The giving up of a genuine spiritual approach to the understanding of the Scriptures and of the world has led to a slackening of the office of watchman in both church and theology. The church, which is called to be a watchman of truth, has become a seduced seductress, a blind leader of the blind.

35. Thanks to the current wave of sex (the undressing of the body) and group dynamics (the undressing of the soul) the shamelessness and the consequent defencelessness of the European man has p.211 become absolutely unbearable. New rules and legalisations twist the order of creation into a lie and increase the creaturely insecurity of man into the new erotic realm; 'only one is the law-giver and the judge who can both save and condemn; who are you who judges another?'

36. The denial of the function of the Church as a watchman for right thinking and action has led Europe to the contemporary moral landslide. The church dare not free

herself from this main responsibility. God will require the blood from her hand ([Ezekiel 3:18](#)).

37. The cause for the lack of authority of the church and for her negligible influence on public opinion lies in the fact that she has not encountered the demonic power of our time with 'thus says the Lord', 'It is written'.

38. Since modern theology has opened and committed itself not only to the Spirit of God but also to the spirit of Greek philosophies it has emptied the Word of God of its power and has become spiritless; for the spirit of God does not compromise itself with pagan, demonic spirits ([I Corinthians 10:20-22](#)),

39. Modern theology does not have the ability to subdue the world (which includes also the sciences, the logic and thought-forms of our times). On the contrary, it has become subject to the world. Theology, the queen of sciences has been thrown down, made powerless, raped; it has become a whore whose crown is in the dust, trampled by swines and dogs.

40. The fall away from the Spirit of God has led the nation of Israel to idolatry; the result: the loss of the glory and presence of God ([1 Samuel 4:21](#)) the glory of the Lord is gone ([Hosea 9:11](#)), the loss of genuine growth because of the lack of witness and the power of conviction ([Hosea 9:11-12](#); [14](#)), the lack of a sense of direction, and finally a sense of lostness.

41. The decorated and veiled thinking referred to in [II Corinthians 3:14-16](#) has brought upon itself the judgement of God, the talk of the 'spirit of intoxication and sleep' in [Romans 11:8](#), of seducing spirits, of the teachers of Demons in [I Timothy 4:1](#) and of the evil spirit which came upon Saul ([I Samuel 16:14-23](#)) show the dimension of the demonic fall and the demonic threat to theology and church.

42. Where there is no vision the people perish ([Proverbs 29:18](#)). We must go back to a theological education which is informed by the spiritual God-given worldview and to a corresponding teaching and witness in this world. Pure scientific work is poor. It does not stand against the demonic fall of our time. Yes, it is sin, because what is not of faith is sin ([Romans 14:26](#)). Flesh and blood cannot save man at the gate of hell ([Matt. 16:17-18](#)) nor do they bring the kingdom of God as [p. 212](#) an inheritance; spirit is to be encountered only with spirit, spirits yield only to *the* spirit—the Holy Spirit.

43. We must go back to the place where we have lost the Spirit, where he has forsaken us, to that place of our fall, of our pride. We must go back to the desert and to the sermon at Jesus' Baptism ([Matt. 3:1-12](#)).

44. Humility—humility and once more humility. Only in humility are we safe against the tempting of Satan; only in a childlike trust in Jesus are we defended by the fire of the Spirit. 'This is the one I esteem, he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word', ([Isaiah 66:2](#)).

45. Only repentance and confession of our misdeeds and of their damnable consequences, only through a calling upon the deepest depths, through waiting upon the Lord, through turning to His face, through his gracious handling, can we still be helped; only so can the Babylonian captivity of our theology and church be corrected. Lord, bring back our prisoners ([Psalm 126:4](#))!

46. What does it profit the European man if he wins the whole world but loses his self ([Matthew 16:26](#))? Without the Spirit of God, man is a vegetating being, seduced by various spirits, enslaved in his own passions, away from God and the meaning of life, without the worship of God, empty and blind, a fading flower, a thorn bush ([I Peter 1:24-25](#); [Gen. 2:18](#)). Without the Spirit, everything is sick—family, marriage, friendship, vocation, body and soul. Only he who is revived from God can heal the family, state and the church.

47. A day of repentance, a week of repentance, a year of repentance! As was once in Israel, ([Joel 2:12-17](#)) or in Nineveh ([Jonah 3:5-10](#)) before the destruction which comes upon us! The patience of God is not endless ([Romans 2:4-8](#)). 'Sir, leave it alone for one more year' ([Luke 13:6-9](#)). Everyone should start with himself, so that judgement can be withheld, so that the hovering summit of divine support and majesty may once more be seen through the poisoned and misty climate of our contemporary time ([Psalm 121](#)).

48. What shall we do? 'If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and will heal their land' (II Chronicle [7:14](#)). 'How much more then, will the blood of Christ who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciousness from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God'. ([Hebrews 9:14](#)). p. 213

### III CONCERNING THE SECRET OF AUTHORITY:

49. The sources of authority lie beyond the realm of flesh and blood. They are shot through and through with God's intervention into our miserable flesh and blood, through the divine person-oriented revelation.

50. God has various means to open our eyes, to bring us out of 'flesh and blood' to be the spirit-born ([Galatians 4:29](#)); through suffering, the shattering of our hopes, through humiliations, through direct callings, (prophets, disciples and apostles) ... Whichever means he uses, in the end it is that Christian who has a disciple's ears who hears who obeys ([Isaiah 50:4-5](#)). Jesus says, my sheep hear my voice ([John 10:27](#))—that is the true sheep the shepherd has.

51. Mere knowledge of God puts us into the realm of theory, into powerlessness and spiritlessness; it is a sign of Christians who live only on the principle of 'hear and say'. 'I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my own eyes have seen thee' ([Job 42:5](#)). That is an experienced revelation.

52. The question of authority stands or fails with one's personal experience of God's calling, anointing and sending.

53. Authority is evidenced in Spirit and power ([Luke 1:17](#)); anointing is to be understood here as a divine calling and equipping for one's office.

54. The Cross of Jesus is a watershed for all the spirits in this world and in our life. There is no authority without the experience of the Cross as judgement and as the liberating grace.

55. The Spirit is holy; in His holiness His power is also to be found. Therefore the result of every kind of compromise at the spiritual level is nothing less than the retreating of the Holy Spirit and of His authority.

56. The Spirit of God does not mix Himself with human pride (flesh)—([Romans 8:7-8](#)); he does not associate Himself with human knowledge or actions, just as he does not mix Himself with pagan spirits and does not compromise with demons.

57. Therefore, we need the Cross. Before the Cross we are poor; 'sell what you have!' We sell also the ideals, the spiritual goods. Before the cross all our goodness comes to nought. Through the cross we are revealed, we are judged to be right, we are justified. Only the judged is the justified—this is biblical justification. Through the Cross we are redeemed from the curse and the claim of spirits upon our lives, from our personal as well as inherited guilt. Through the cross we are reconciled with God, we are forgiven.

58. Thus the Cross makes it possible for God to dethrone the p. 214 powers of darkness in the kingdom of the Son. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the

promise of the Spirit. Henceforth, only the ungraspable word of the Father is valid: 'everything what is mine is thine'. 'God gives his Spirit without measure'.

59. Only as we are poor, as we depend on the Father as children, and are guided daily, do we have power over demons, sin, death and Satan ([Luke 10:19-22](#)).

60. It is since the Enlightenment that childhood and poverty before God and in Spirit have become menaces against Christ (II Corin. [11:3](#)); they have been confused with intellectual immaturity. In this confusion lies the root of current perversions.

61. The historical critical research of the Bible as a method is a child of the enlightenment and as such, it gives greater allegiance to the Greek philosophies than to the biblical spirit. It is a bastard in theological cloths. Actually, because of this method the concept of Scripture as the temple and place where God lives and speaks is lost. Scripture has been made a desert.

62. The so-called scientific theology has erected altars to the Baal of this 'deserted holiness' and has for generations given the sacrifices of philosophy. This is the root of the theological impotence of our times.

63. Therefore it is impossible in such a situation to come to a spiritual renewal and a spiritual authority in the churches, so long as these altars to the Baal of 'deserted holiness' are endured and even repaired! As at the time of Gideon and Elijah, these strange altars must be destroyed and the broken altar of the Lord must once again be built up. The fire of the Spirit falls only on the reconstructed altar of the Lord, only upon the altars and men who are sanctified by God himself.

64. Here there is only an either-or: either the Spirit of God or the Greek spirit. How long do we hang on to both the sides? If the Lord is God then turn to him, but if Baal is God then turn to him. The touchstone is therefore the question of authority, the fire of the Spirit.

65. The disciple of Christ lives because he does the will of God just as the Son lived because he did the will of the Father and completed His work.

66. To work other than the work of God and to will other than the will of God excludes us from participation in the kingdom of heaven and makes us evil doers. To will the will of God and to work His work is the precondition of power and authority.

67. The recognition of doing of the will of God is closely related to: the humility of a broken spirit which has learned to yield to the Word [p. 215](#) of God, the dedication of life as a living sacrifice to the Lord; the love of God—total, complete, fulfilled. It is also a wholistic (comprising the total man) and not just a noetic intellectual act. It is rather an act of the *heart*.

68. It is the authority of Jesus which lifted his teaching above that of the Scribes. His words were fulfilled; they were powerful, even creative. He transmitted not just knowledge but life, yes, the Spirit. Therefore the goal of our preaching and proclamation should not be the transmission of knowledge, but rather authority must be evidenced through the release of spiritual power and in the building up of life.

69. The spirits yield to the Spirit. The coming of the Spirit in the world and into the realm of the spirits signals the outbreak of the kingdom of God. This coming and this outbreak happened in Jesus. He is the bringer of the Spirit as well as of the kingdom of God.

70. Without being intimately related to this dimension of the spirit, without living in it we are authorityless and powerless, even lifeless. We do not at all belong to, but stand outside of, the kingdom of God.

71. Jesus gave his authority to his disciples, and even today they receive this authority from him, the head of the Church.



72. Authority must prove itself. Times of wilderness and direct confrontation with evil serve such a purpose of proving authority. Authority is strengthened through prayer and fasting, through voluntary isolation from work and appointments. Only he who can fast can feast!

73. The Spirit is pure and gentle as a dove. It is quite easy to drive him away. Especially through dead and empty, killing and loveless words. These lazy words have the smell of destruction around them and transmit destruction; whereas an authoritative word is a spirit-filled and life-filled word; it is truth in love.

#### **IV CONCERNING THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIP OF GOD'S SPIRIT WITH THE HUMAN SPIRIT**

'The grace of Him that dwelt in the thorn-bush' ([Deut. 33:16](#)). 'He who boasts let him boast in the Lord' ([I Corinthians 1:31](#)).

74. The Spirit of God and the spirit of man are not identical. Since the triumph of idealism the effort is made repeatedly to equate the human with the divine spirit. Man cannot become God. The fallen man whose light is quenched, the natural man who is dead in himself, cannot understand the spirit of God ([I Corinthians 2:14](#), [Ephesians 2:1](#)) Therefore the equation of God's Spirit with man's is a heresy, a lie.

75. Since the fall of man, attempts were made time and again to [p. 216](#) enlighten man through strange altars and fires; this was also Cain's way and it is also the attempt of all religions to this day. Cain's altar was rejected, it was the altar without blood, without forgiveness and without the cross. The fallen angels, as the angels of light ([II Corinthians 11:14](#)) do not shy away from the Holy One; on the contrary they make use of, usurp and pervert the longing of man after the Holy One, after the true light. No man is excluded from their seductions.

76. Only the Cross (as the concretization of everyone's legitimate altar) cannot be imitated by the demons ([Leviticus 17:7-9](#)). Only the Cross prepares the way towards the Father ([John 14:6](#)); only at the cross are our fame and self-righteousness judged; only at the Cross has the holy blood of Jesus supplied ransom for us against demonic seduction and ownership of our spirits; only at the cross is the quenched light again re-kindled, purified, and only at the cross are we led back to God in repentance and redemption, forgiveness and new birth.

77. All other altars, temples and fires stand under the verdict of [Leviticus 17:9](#). It is the fate of Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, who brought their own strange fire to the altar of the Lord and brought upon themselves the fire of the Lord for their destruction.

78. The Biblical witness speaks of the spirit of man, calls him a lamp of the Lord which is lighted up by the fire of the Spirit of God, knows of his quenchedness and consequent darkening of his mind, testifies to the meaning of the coming of Jesus in terms of the ability to give sight to the blind and the blinded, and in the kindling and the reviving of the human spirit in close relationship with his participation in the redeemed, forgiven humanity in the revival and the resurrection of Jesus.

79. Human reason needs the enlightened leading of the human spirit, otherwise it works goallessly and meaninglessly.

80. The revival of the human spirit through the touch of the divine spirit in new birth, the birth from above, restores the human spirit to its former position to take a leading role over reason. 'Yes you make my lamp brighter, the Lord my God makes my darkness light'. ([Psalm 18:29](#)).

81. The Bible knows a dualism between flesh and the spirit, but not between reason and spirit. According to [Proverbs 8:12](#), both these aspects exist together in man. The spirit



does not incapacitate reason but inspires it, enables and equips it. Wisdom and cleverness, spirit and reason contain wealth and honour, health and salvation ([Proverbs 8:8](#)). So is man saved: that man is to be praised who demands wisdom of the spirit, wisdom of Jesus ([I Corinthians 1:30](#)).

82. The Bible presents clear priorities: the priority of the spirit over [p. 217](#) reason, and warns against a fatal twisting of it which results in the sick, psychosomatic phenomena of our time.

83. God's spirit is creative, life-giving. With the help of the Spirit and having been enlightened by Him, the spirit of man can scrutinize and understand all the areas of his life.

84. Only the Lord can understand the deep things of the human heart ([Jeremiah 17:10](#)). It is all his right; all psychoanalysis and psychotherapies, if they are not filtered through Jesus as the door and the light, and enter into the human spirit, rob, steal and murder ([John 10:7-10](#)), because they are emptied of the creative, healing spirit, and therefore become only theoretical, analyzing and eventually powerless and helpless procedures.

85. Only he who believes understands ([Romans 14:23](#)); *Credo ut intelligam* (I believe, therefore I understand). Only he who loves can understand, only he who is recognised by God and is called by him by name can really recognise others ([I Corinthians 8:2-3](#)). Therefore every act of recognition must be wholistic, integrated action including the whole of man and God, an act of the heart and not of the mind. One can see good only through the heart. Love is the key to the secrets of the heart of God.

86. The 'healed' man in whom the lamp is burning and the guiding of the divine reason is given, has the duty to subdue the earth, subdue all the areas of knowledge ([Genesis 1:28](#)). True faith can never be friendly to the so-called scientific methods but it places all the areas of life and knowledge under the liberating, redeeming and inspiring obedience of Christ ([II Corinthians 10:5](#)).

## **V CONCERNING THE WORLD-RESPONSIBILITY OF THEOLOGY AND FAITH**

87. The earth is the Lord's and all that is therein ([Psalm 24:1](#)). The creation story in the Bible is an owner's statement; what God has created is his property.

88. Therefore all research in all areas, especially in the areas of physics and more recently in the area of biology and biochemics, must be constantly aware that they are not autonomous, because all these areas belong to God as His property; nature and her powers are God's property and they are at the disposal of the prayerful, thankful man.

89. This means that man is a guest of God on this earth and he must behave himself correspondingly. All research must take place in the response of faith to the owner, the Creator. He who does not respond in this way does not do research, but robs, forfeits his right of dwelling on God's property. [p. 218](#)

90. The Word of God clearly testifies that he who spoils the earth him will God spoil ([Revelation 11:18](#)), he who kills man will be killed by man himself ([I Corinthians 3:17](#)), especially in the area of liberalization of abortion laws and of gene manipulation methods. It must be seen that they stand under the judgement of God.

91. How terrible therefore are some of the European theories of evolution, which dissolved man's responsibility before his creator! Thus, even in the light of the ecological crises of our times it can only mean: repent! The axe is laid at the root of the tree ([Matt. 3:10](#)).

92. For 200 years we have been talking in the poisonous intellectual smoke of German theology and science; and now we have realized that it is the cup of God's wrath ([Isaiah 51:17-23](#)) and a cup of God's judgement; because we thought ourselves wise, we have been choked by the German creations ([I Corinthians 1:29](#)). 'I testify for them that they are zealous for God, but without understanding'.

93. Only through a refreshing spiritual wind instead of these powerful dust and snow storms, can the 200 year strong intellectual 'ice-age' in Europe be overcome and the ice melted for the use of man ([Psalm 147:8](#)). He sends his word so that the snow melts. He sends his wind, so it works. The intellectual gifts which should have brought us to maturity have brought us to a fall, because they have stayed in the place of God, the only giver of all good things ([James 3:17](#)).

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Rev. Scheunemann studied theology in Tübingen, Göttingen and Kitzingen, and served as a missionary with WEC in Batu, Indonesia, as an evangelist and teacher at the Indonesian Bible Institute, Batu. [p. 219](#)

# The Gospel as the Prisoner and Liberator of Culture

Andrew F. Walls

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*Covering the broad span of Church history the author surveys the tension between the indigenising and pilgrim principles in the gospel's encounter with culture. He raises important questions about the future of Christian theology and African theologies in particular. This article is based on Prof. Walls' lecture at 1980 VI Symposium of the Victoria Institute of Great Britain.*

## IS THERE A 'HISTORIC CHRISTIAN FAITH'?

Let us imagine a long-living scholarly space visitor—a Professor of Comparative Inter-Planetary Religions perhaps—who is able to get periodic space-grants which enable him to visit Earth for field study every few centuries. Let us further assume that he wishes to pursue the study of the earth-religion Christianity on principles of Baconian induction, observing the practices, habits and concerns of a representative sample of Christians, and that he exploits the advantage he has over any earthbound scholar by taking his sample across the centuries.

Let us assume his first visit to be to a group of the original Jerusalem Christians, about 37 AD. He notes that they are all Jews; indeed, they are meeting in the Temple, where only Jews can enter. They offer animal sacrifices. They keep the seventh day punctiliously free from work. They circumcize their male children. They carefully follow a succession of rituals, and delight in the reading of old Law books. They appear, in fact, to be one of several 'denominations' of Judaism. What distinguishes them from the others is simply

that they identify the figures of Messiah, Son of Man and Suffering Servant (figures all described in those law books) with the recent prophet-teacher Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believe to have inaugurated the last days. They live normal family lives, with a penchant for large, close families; and they have a tightly-knit social organization, with many common meals taken in each other's houses. Law and joyful observance strike our spaceman observer as key notes of the religion of these early Christians.

His next visit to earth is made about 325 AD. He attends a great meeting of Church leaders—perhaps even the Council of Nicea. The company come from all over the Mediterranean world and beyond it, but hardly one of them is Jewish; indeed on the whole they are rather hostile to Jews. They are horrified at the thought of animal sacrifices; p. 220 when they talk about offering sacrifices they mean bread and wine used rather as it was in the house meals our observer noticed in Jerusalem. They do not have children themselves, since Church leaders are not expected to marry, and indeed most of them regard marriage as an inferior, morally compromised state; but they would regard a parent who circumcized his children as having betrayed his faith. They treat the Seventh Day as an ordinary working day: they have special religious observances on the first day, but do not necessarily abstain from work or other activities. They use the Law Books that the Jerusalem Christians used, in translation, and thus know the titles Messiah, Son of Man and Suffering Servant; but 'Messiah' has now become almost the surname of Jesus, and the other titles are hardly used at all. They give equal value to another set of writings, not even composed when the Jerusalem Christians met, and tend to use other titles, 'Son of God', 'Lord', to designate Jesus.

Their present preoccupation, however, is with the application of another set of words to Jesus—words not to be found in either set of writings. The debate, (and they believe it of absolutely fundamental importance) is over whether the Son is *homo-ousios* with the Father, or only *homoi-ousios* with Him.

The dominant factors which the outsider notices as characteristic of these Christians are the concern with metaphysics and theology, an intense intellectual scrutiny, an attempt to find precise significance for precise terms. He thinks of the Jewish Christians in the Temple nearly three centuries back, and wonders.

The best cure for his wonderment is the still greater wonder of a journey to Ireland some three centuries later still.

A number of monks are gathered on a rocky coastline. Several are standing in ice-cold water up to their necks, reciting the psalms. Some are standing immobile, praying—with their arms outstretched in the form of a cross. One is receiving six strokes of the lash because he did not answer 'Amen' when the grace was said at the last meal of brown bread and pulse. Others are going off in a small boat in doubtful weather with a box of beautiful manuscripts and not much else to distribute themselves on islands in the Firth of Clyde, calling the astonished inhabitants to give up their worship of nature divinities and seek for joy in a future heavenly kingdom: others are sitting quite alone in dark caves by the seashore, seeking no intercourse with men.

He ascertains from these curious beings that their beautiful manuscripts include versions of the same holy writings that the Greek fathers used. He notices that the Irish use the same formula that he heard being hammered out in Nicea in 325 AD; somewhat to his surprise, p. 221 because they do not in general seem very interested in theology or very good at metaphysics. They attach great importance to the date on which they celebrate their main festival, Easter; an outsider is most likely to notice their desire for holiness and their heroic austerity in quest of it.

Our spaceman delays his next visit until the 1840s, when he comes to London and finds in Exeter Hall a large and visibly excited assembly hearing speeches about the

desirability of promoting Christianity, commerce and civilization in Africa. They are proposing that missionaries armed with Bibles and cotton seeds be sent a distance of four thousand miles to effect the process. They are also proposing a deputation to the British Government about the necessity of putting down the slave trade, raising a subscription to promote the education of black mechanics, agreeing that letters be written, pamphlets and articles published. The meeting has begun with a reading from the same book (in English translation) that the other Christians used, and there have been many other quotations from the book; indeed, a large number of people in the meeting seem to be carrying it. On enquiry, the observer finds that most also accept without question the creed of Nicea. Like the Irish, they also use the word 'holy' quite a lot; but they are aghast at the suggestion that holiness could be connected with standing in cold water, and utterly opposed to the idea of spending life praying in an isolated cave. Whereas the Irish monks were seeking to live on as little as possible, most of this group look remarkably well fed. What impresses the outsider is their activism and the involvement of their religion in all the processes of life and society.

In 1980 he comes to earth again, this time to Lagos, Nigeria. A white-robed group is dancing and chanting through the streets on their way to their church. They are informing the world at large that they are Cherubim and Seraphim; they are inviting people to come and experience the power of God in their services. They claim that God has messages for particular individuals and that His power can be demonstrated in healing. They carry and quote from the same book as the Exeter Hall gentlemen. They say (on being shown the document in a prayer book) that they accept the creed of Nicea, but they display little interest in it: they appear somewhat vague about the relationship of the Divine Son and the Holy Spirit. They are not politically active and the way of life pursued by the Exeter Hall gentlemen is quite foreign to them; they fast like the Irish, but only on fixed occasions and for fixed purposes. The characteristic which springs most readily to the spaceman's mind is their concern with power, as revealed in preaching, healing, and personal vision.

p. 222

Back in his planetary home, how does our scholar correlate the phenomena he has observed? It is not simply that these five groups of humans, all claiming to be Christians, appear to be concerned about different things; the concerns of one group appear suspect or even repellent to another.

Now in no case has he chosen freakish examples of Christians. He has gone to groups which may, as far as such statements can be permissible at all, be said to reflect representative concerns of Christians of those times and places, and in each case the place is in the Christian heartlands of that period. In AD 37 most Christians were Jews. Not only was Jerusalem the main Christian centre; Jerusalem Christians laid down the norms and standards for other people. By AD 325 few Christians were Jews, the main Christian centres lay in the Eastern Mediterranean and the key language for Christians was Greek. By AD 600, the balance had shifted westward, and the growing edge of Christianity was among the northern and western tribal and semi-tribal peoples—and Ireland was a power centre. In the 1840s Great Britain would certainly be among the outstanding Christian nations, and certainly the one most notably associated with the expansion of the Christian faith. By 1980, the balance had shifted again, southwards; Africa is now the continent most notable for those that profess and call themselves Christians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> cf. D. B. Barrett, 'A.D. 2000:350 million Christians in Africa', *International Review of Mission* 59 (1970), 39–54; A. F. Wails, 'Towards understanding Africa's place in Christian history', in J. S. Pobee (ed.), *Religion in a pluralistic society: essays presented to Professor C. G. Baëta*, Leiden 1976, p.180–189.

So will our visitor conclude that there *is* no coherence? That the use of the name Christian by such diverse groups is fortuitous, or at least misleading? Or does he catch among the spheres some trace of Gilbert Murray's remark that representative Christians of the third, thirteenth and twentieth centuries would have less in common that would a Catholic, Methodist and Freethinker, or even (glancing round the College Common Room and noting the presence of Sir Savapelli Radhakrishnan) 'a well-educated Buddhist or Brahmin at the present day'.<sup>2</sup> Is shared religion in the end simply a function of shared culture?

Our spaceman may, however, note that between the five groups he has visited there is a historical connection. It was Christians scattered from Jerusalem who first preached to Greeks and founded that vast Greek edifice he observed in 325; it is in Eastern Christianity that we must seek some of the important features and some of the power of Celtic Christian religion. That Celtic religion played a vital part in the p. 223 gradual emergence of the religion of Exeter Hall. And the Cherubim and Seraphim now in Lagos are ultimately a result of the very sort of operations which were under discussion at the Exeter Hall meeting.

But besides this historical connection, closer examination reveals that there are other definite signs of continuity. There is, in all the wild profusion of the varying statements of these differing groups, one theme which is unvarying as the language which expresses it is various: that the person of Jesus called the Christ has ultimate significance. In the institutional sphere, too, all use the same sacred writings; and all use bread and wine and water in a special way. Still more remarkable is the continuity of consciousness. Each group thinks of itself as having some community with the others, so different in time and place, and despite being so obviously out of sympathy with many of their principal concerns. Still more remarkable, each thinks of itself as in some respect continuous with ancient Israel, even though only the first have any conceivable ethnic reason to do so, and though some of the groups must have found it extremely hard to form any concept of ancient Israel, or any clear idea of what a Jew might be or look like.

Our observer is therefore led to recognize an essential continuity of Christianity: continuity of thought about the final significance of Jesus, continuity of a certain consciousness about history, continuity in the use of the Scriptures, of bread and wine, of water. But he recognizes that these continuities are cloaked with such heavy veils belonging to their environment that Christians of different times and places must often be unrecognizable to others, or indeed even to themselves, as manifestations of a single phenomenon.

## THE 'INDIGENIZING' PRINCIPLE

Church history has always been a battleground for two opposing tendencies; and the reason is that each of the tendencies has its origin in the Gospel itself. On the one hand it is of the essence of the Gospel that God accepts us as we are, on the ground of Christ's work alone, not on the ground of what we have become or are trying to become. But, if He accepts us 'as we are' that implies He does not take us as isolated, self-governing units, because we are not. We are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by 'culture' in fact. In Christ God accepts us together with our group relations; with that cultural conditioning that makes us feel at home in one part of human society and less at home in another. But if He takes us with our group relations, then surely it follows that He takes us with P. 224 our 'dis-relations' also; those predispositions,

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<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Murray, *Five stages of Greek religion*, 1935, p.174.



prejudices, suspicions and hostilities, whether justified or not, which mark the group to which we belong. He does not wait to tidy up our ideas any more than He waits to tidy up our behaviour before He accepts us sinners into His family.

The impossibility of separating an individual from his social relationships and thus from his society leads to one unvarying feature in Christian history: the desire to 'indigenize', to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one's own society, to make the church (to use the memorable title of a book about Independent churches in Africa) 'A place to feel at home'.<sup>3</sup> The desire to do this is tied up with the very nature of the Gospel; it is patterned in the Incarnation itself. When God became man, Christ took flesh in a particular family, members of a particular nation, with the tradition of customs associated with that nation. All that was not evil He sanctified. Wherever He is taken by men in any time and place He takes that nationality, that society, that 'culture', and sanctifies all that is capable of sanctification by his presence.

This fact has led to more than one crisis in Christian history, including the first and most important of all. When the elders at Jerusalem in the council of [Acts 15](#) came to their decision that Gentiles could enter Israel without becoming Jews, had they any idea how close the time would be when *most* Christians would be Gentiles? And would they have been so happy with their decision had they realized it? Throughout the early years the Jerusalem Church was in a position to set the standards and to make the decisions, because of its direct connection with the Saviour, and its incomparably greater knowledge of the Scriptures. And when its historic decision opened the door wide for Gentile believers in the Jewish Messiah, there must have been many who assumed that nevertheless Gentile Christians, as they matured, would come to look as much like Jerusalem Christians as was possible for such benighted heathen. At least [Acts 21:20](#) suggests that, while being decently glad of the 'mission field' conversions recounted by Paul, they continued to think of Jerusalem as the regulative centre of God's saving work. What were the thoughts of those who fled from Jerusalem as the Roman armies moved in to cast down the Temple? Did they realize that the future of Messiah's proclamation now lay with people who were uncircumcized, defective in their knowledge of Law and Prophets, still confused by hangovers from paganism, and able to [p. 225](#) eat pork without turning a hair? Yet this—and the fact that there were still many left to speak of Jesus as Messiah—was the direct result of the decision of the Jerusalem Council to allow Gentile converts 'a place to feel at home'. So also was the acceptance of Paul's emphatic teaching that since God accepts the heathen as they are, circumcision, food avoidances and ritual washings, are not for them. Christ has so made Himself at home in Corinthian society that a pagan is consecrated through his or her Christian marriage partner ([1 Cor. 7:14](#)) No group of Christians has therefore any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place.

The fact, then, that 'if any man is in Christ he is a new creation' does not mean that he starts or continues his life in a vacuum, or that his mind is a blank table. It has been formed by his own culture and history, and since God has accepted him as he is, his Christian mind will continue to be influenced by what was in it before. And this is as true for groups as for persons. All churches are culture churches—including our own.

But throughout Church history there has been another force in tension with this indigenizing principle, and this also is equally of the Gospel. Not only does God in Christ take people as they are; He takes them in order to transform them into what He wants them to be. Along with the indigenizing principle which makes his faith a place to feel at home, the Christian inherits the pilgrim principle, which whispers to him that he has no

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<sup>3</sup> By F. B. Welbourn and B. A. Ogot, 1967.



abiding city and warns him that to be faithful to Christ will put him out of step with his society; for that society never existed, in East or West, ancient time or modern, which could absorb the word of Christ painlessly into its system. Jesus within Jewish culture, Paul within Hellenistic culture, take it for granted that there will be rubs and frictions—not from the adoption of a new culture, but from the transformation of the mind towards that of Christ.

Just as the indigenizing principle, itself rooted in the Gospel, associates Christians with the *particulars* of their culture and group, the pilgrim principle, in tension with the indigenizing and equally of the Gospel, by associating them with things and people outside the culture and group, is in some respects a *universalizing* factor. The Christian has all the relationships in which he was brought up, and has them sanctified by Christ who is living in them. But he has also an entirely new set of relationships, with other members of the family of faith into which he has come, and whom he must accept, with all their group relations (and ‘disrelations’) on them, just as God has accepted him with his. Every Christian has dual nationality, and has a loyalty to p. 226 the faith family which links him to those in interest groups opposed to that to which he belongs by nature.

In addition—as we observed to be the case in all the spaceman’s varied groups of representative Christians—the Christian is given an adoptive past. He is linked to the people of God in all generations (like him, members of the faith family), and most strangely of all, to the whole history of Israel, the curious continuity of the race of the faithful from Abraham. By this means, the history of Israel is part of Church history,<sup>4</sup> and all Christians of whatever nationality, are landed by adoption with several millennia of someone else’s history, with a whole set of ideas, concepts and assumptions which do not necessarily square with the rest of their cultural inheritance; and the Church in every land, of whatever race and type of society, has this same adoptive past by which it needs to interpret the fundamentals of the faith. The adoption into Israel becomes a ‘universalizing’ factor, bringing Christians of all cultures and ages together through a common inheritance, lest any of us make the Christian faith such a place to feel at home that no one else can live there; and bringing into everyone’s society some sort of outside reference.

## THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND ITS CULTURAL CONDITIONING

In the remainder of this paper I would like to suggest something of the relevance of the tension between the indigenizing and the pilgrim principles for the future of Christian theology.

First, let us recall that within the last century there has been a massive southward shift of the centre of gravity of the Christian world, so that the representative Christian lands now appear to be in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other parts of the southern continents. This means that Third World theology is now likely to be the representative Christian theology. On present trends (and I recognize that these may not be permanent) the theology of European Christians, while important for them and their continued existence, may become a matter of specialist interest to historians (rather as the theology of the Syriac Edessene Church is a specialist matter for early church historians of today, not a topic for the ordinary student and general reader, whose eyes are turned to the

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<sup>4</sup> ‘.. the first fact of the Church (is) that we are Gentiles who worship the God of the Jews’—with *their* psalms, in Gentile languages but their concepts. P. van Buren, ‘The mystery and salvation and prayer’, *Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies Yearbook*, Jerusalem 1977–78, 37–52.

Greco-Roman world when he studies the history of doctrine). The future general reader of Church [p. 227](#) history is more likely to be concerned with Latin American and African, and perhaps some Asian, theology. It is perhaps significant that in the last few years we have seen for the first time works of theology composed in the Third World (the works of Latin American theologians of liberation, such as Gutierrez, Segundo and Miguez Bonino) becoming regular reading in the west—not just for missiologists, but for the general theological reader. The fact that particular Third World works of theology appear on the Western market is not, however, a necessary measure of their intrinsic importance. It simply means that publishers think them sufficiently relevant to the West to sell there. Theology is addressed to the setting in which it is produced.

This is perhaps the first important point to remember about theology: that since it springs out of practical situations, it is therefore *occasional* and *local* in character. Since we have mentioned Gutierrez, some words of his may be quoted here. Theology, he says, arises spontaneously and inevitably in the believer, in all who have accepted the gift of the word of God. There is therefore in every believer, and every community of believers, at least a rough outline of a theology. This conviction leads to another: whatever else theology is, it is what Gutierrez calls ‘critical reflexion on Christian practice in the light of the word’.<sup>5</sup> That is, theology is about testing your actions by Scripture.

In this, of course, we are hearing the typical modern Latin American theologian, who is stung by the fact that it has taken Marxists to point out things that Amos and Isaiah said long ago, while Christians have found good theological reasons to justify the position of Jeroboam, Manasseh and Dives; and is nagged by the remark of Bernanos that ‘God does not choose the same men to keep his word as to fulfill it’. But it is likely to be the way of things also in Africa. The domestic tasks of Third World theology are going to be so basic, so vital, that there will be little time for the barren, sterile time-wasting by-paths into which so much Western theology and theological research has gone in recent years. Theology in the Third World will be, as theology at all creative times has always been, about *doing* things, about things that deeply affect the lives of numbers of people. We see something of this already in South African Black Theology, which is literally about life and death matters (As one South African Black Theologian put it to me ‘Black Theology is about how to stay Christian when you’re a Black in South Africa, and you’re hanging on by the skin of your teeth.’) There is no need to go back to wars of religion when men shed blood for their theologies: but at least there is something to be said for having a [p. 228](#) theology about things which are worth shedding blood for. And that, Third World Theology is likely to be.

Because of this relation of theology to action, theology arises out of situations that actually happen, not from broad general principles. Even the Greek Church, with centuries of intellectual and rhetorical tradition took almost 200 years to produce a book of theology written for its own sake, Origen’s *De Principiis*. In those two centuries innumerable theological books were written, but not for the sake of producing theologies. The theology was for a purpose: to *explain* the faith to outsiders, or to point out where the writer thought someone else has misrepresented what Christians meant.

It is therefore important, when thinking of African theology, to remember that it will act on an African agenda. It is useless for us to determine what we think an African theology ought to be doing: it will concern itself with questions that worry Africans, and will leave blandly alone all sorts of questions which we think absolutely vital. We all do the same. How many Christians belonging to churches which accept the Chalcedonian Definition of the Faith could explain with any conviction to an intelligent non-Christian

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<sup>5</sup> G. Gutierrez, *A theology of liberation*, Eng. trs. Maryknoll and London 1973, 6–15

why it is important not to be a Nestorian or a Monophysite? Yet once men not only excommunicated each other, they shed their own and other's blood to get the right answer on that question. The things which we think are vital points of principle will seem as far away and negligible to African theologians as those theological prize fights among the Egyptian monks now seem to us. Conversely the things that concern African theologians may seem to us at best peripheral. Remembering the emergence of theology at a popular level, it is noteworthy how African Independent churches sometimes seem to pick on a point which strikes us by its oddity or irrelevance, like rules about worship during the menstrual period. But this is usually because the topic, or the sort of topic, is a major one for certain African Christians, just as it apparently was for the old Hebrews and it needs an answer, and an answer related to Christ. There often turns out to be a sort of coherence in the way in which these churches deal with it, linking Scripture, old traditions and the Church as the new Levitical community—and giving an answer to something that had been worrying people. In short, it is safe for a European to make only one prediction about the valid, authentic African Biblical theology we all talk about: that it is likely either to puzzle us or to disturb us.

But is not the sourcebook of all valid theology the canonical Scriptures? Yes, and in that, as the spaceman found, lies the continuity of the Christian faith. But, as he also found, the Scriptures are read with [p. 229](#) different eyes by people in different times and places; and in practice, each age and community makes its own selection of the Scriptures, giving prominence to those which seem to speak most clearly to the community's time and place and leaving aside others which do not appear to yield up their gold so readily. How many of us, while firm as a rock as to its canonicity, seriously look to the book of Leviticus for sustenance? Yet many an African Independent church has found it abundantly relevant. (Interestingly, Samuel Ajayi Crowther, the great 19th century Yoruba missionary bishop, thought it should be among the first books of the Bible to be translated).

The indigenizing principle ensures that each community recognizes in Scripture that God is speaking to its own situation. But it also means that we all approach Scripture wearing cultural blinkers, with assumptions determined by our time and place. It astonishes us when we read second century Christian writers who all venerated Paul, and to whom we owe the preservation of his writings, that they never seem to understand what we are sure he means by justification by faith. It is perhaps only in our own day, when we do not read Plato so much, that Western Christians have begun to believe that the resurrection of the body is not the immortality of the soul, or to recognize the solidly material content of Biblical salvation. Africans will have their cultural blinkers, too, which will prevent, or at least render it difficult for them to see some things. But they will doubtless be different things from those hidden in our own blind spots, so they should be able to see some things much better than we do.

That wise old owl, Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society, reflecting on the Great Commission in 1868, argued that the fulness of the Church would only come with the fulness of the national manifestations of different national churches.

Inasmuch as all native churches grow up into the fulness of the Stature of Christ, distinctions and defects will vanish ... But it may be doubted whether, to the last, the Church of Christ will not exhibit marked national characteristics which, in the overruling grace of God, will tend to its perfection and glory.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Instructions of the Committee of the Church Missionary Society to departing missionaries 30 June 1868. (Reproduced in W. Knight, *The missionary secretariat of Henry Venn*, 1880, 284).

Perhaps it is not only that different ages and nations see different things in Scripture—it is that they *need to see different things*. p. 230

## THE PRESENT AFRICAN THEOLOGICAL DEBATE

The major theological debate in independent Africa<sup>7</sup> just now—Item 1 on the African theological agenda—would appear to be the nature of the African past. Almost every major work by an African scholar in the field of religions—Harry Sawyerr,<sup>8</sup> Bolaji Idowu,<sup>9</sup> J. S. Mbiti,<sup>10</sup> Vincent Mulago<sup>11</sup>—in some way dealing with it. Now each of the authors named was trained in theology on a western model; but each has moved into an area for which no Western syllabus prepared him, for each has been forced to study and lecture on African traditional religion—and each has found himself writing on it. It seems to me, however, that they all approach this topic, not as historians of religion do, nor as anthropologists do. They are still, in fact, Christian theologians. All are wrestling with a theological question, the prime one on the African Christian's intellectual agenda: who am I? What is my relation as an African Christian to Africa's past?

Thus, when Idowu concludes with such passion that the *oriás* are only manifestations of *Olódùmare*, and that it is a Western misrepresentation to call Yoruba religion polytheistic, the urgency in his voice arises from the fact that he is not making a clinical observation of the sort one might make about Babylonian religion: he is handling dynamite, his own past, his people's present. One can see why a non-Christian African writer like Obot p'Bitek, who glories in pre-Christian Africa, accuses John Mbiti and others so bitterly of continuing the Western missionary misrepresentation of the past.<sup>12</sup> It is as though he were saying 'They are taking from us our own decent paganism, and plastering it over with interpretations from alien sources'. Here speaks the authentic voice of Celsus.

The mention of Celsus reminds us perhaps that African Christians are not the first people to have a religious identity crisis. Gentile Christians had precisely the same issue to face—an issue that never faced the Jewish missionaries, Paul, Peter, Barnabas. They knew who they were ('circumcized the eighth day, of the tribe of Benjamin ...'), just as Western missionaries for more than 150 confident years knew who p. 231 *they* were. It is our past which tells us who we are; without our past we are lost. The man with amnesia is lost, unsure of relationships, incapable of crucial decisions, precisely because all the time he has amnesia he is without his past. Only when his memory returns, when he is sure of his past, is he able to relate confidently to his wife, his parents, or know his place in a society.

Early Gentile Christianity went through a period of amnesia. It was not so critical for first generation converts: they responded to a clear choice, turned from idols to serve the living God, accepted the assurance that they had been grafted into Israel. It was the second

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<sup>7</sup> 'Independent Africa' is here distinguished from South Africa, where different conditions have produced different priorities and a different debate.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. *God—Ancestor or Creator?* 1970.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Olódùmare. God in Yoruba belief*, 1962; *African traditional religion: a definition*, 1973.

<sup>10</sup> *New Testament eschatology in an African background*, Oxford 1971; *African religious and philosophy*, 1969; *Concepts of God in Africa*, 1970.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. his 'Christianisme et culture africaine', in C. G. Baëta (ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa*, 1968, pp.308–328.

<sup>12</sup> Okot p'Bitek, *African religions in Western scholarship*, Kampala 1971.

and third generation of Christians who felt the strain more. What was their relation to the Greek past? Some of them (some indeed in the first generation, as the New Testament indicates) solved the problem by pretending their Greek past did not exist, by pretending they were Jews, adopting Jewish customs, even to circumcision. Paul saw this coming and roundly condemned it. You are *not* Jews, he argues in [Romans 9–11](#); you *are* Israel, but grafted into it. And, defying all the realities of horticulture, he talks about a wild plant being grafted into a cultivated one. But one thing he is saying is that Gentile Christianity is part of the *wild* olive. It is different in character from the plant into which it is grafted. Such is the necessity of the indigenizing principle.

Later Gentile Christians, by then the majority in the Church, and in no danger of confusing themselves with Jews, had a major problem. Yes, they were grafted into Israel. The sacred history of Israel was part of their history. Yes, the idolatry and immorality of their own society, past and present, must have nothing to do with them. But what was God doing in the Greek world all those centuries while He was revealing himself in judgment and mercy to Israel? Not all the Greek past was graven images and temple prostitution. What of those who testified for righteousness—and even died for it? Had God nothing to do with their righteousness? What of those who taught things that are true—that are according to reason, *logos* opposed to the Great Lies taught and practised by others? Had their *logos* nothing to do with The Logos, the light that lighteth every man coming into the world? Is there any truth which is not God's truth? Was God not active in the Greek past, not just the Jewish? So Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria came up with their own solutions, that there were Christians before Christ, that philosophy was—and is—the schoolmaster to bring the Greeks to Christ, just as was the Law for Jews.

This is no place to renew the old debate about continuity or discontinuity of Christianity with pre-Christian religion, nor to discuss the theology of Justin and Clement, nor to consider the correctness of [p. 232](#) Idowu and Mbiti. My point is simply that the two latter are wrestling with essentially the same problem as the two former, and that it seems to be the most urgent problem facing African Christians today, on their agenda. Until it is thought through, amnesia could make African Christianity tentative and unsure of its relationships, and unable to recognise important tasks. More than one answer may emerge; the early centuries, after all, saw the answer of Tertullian as well as of Clement. And there may be little that outsiders can do to assist. Once again Paul saw what was coming. 'Is He not', he asks his Jewish interlocutor, and on the most thoroughly Jewish grounds, 'the God of the Gentiles also?' ([Rom. 3:29f](#)).

The debate will certainly reflect the continuing tension between the indigenizing and the pilgrim principles of the Gospel. Paul, Justin and Clement all knew people who followed one without the other. Just as there were 'pilgrims' who sought to follow, or to impose upon others the modes of thought and life, concerns and preconceptions which belonged to someone else, so there were Greek educated 'indigenizers' who sought to eliminate what they considered 'barbarian' elements from Christianity such as the Resurrection and the Last Judgment. But these things were part of a framework which ultimately derived from the Christian faith, and thus they played down, or ignored, or explicitly rejected, the Old Testament, the Christian adoptive past. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about the opponents of these Gnostics is that they were just as Greek as the Gnostics themselves, with many of the same instincts and difficulties; but they knew instinctively that they must hold to their adoptive past, and in doing so saved the Scriptures for the Church. Perhaps the real test of theological authenticity is the capacity to incorporate the history of Israel and God's people and to treat it as one's own.

When the Scriptures are read in some enclosed Zulu Zion, the hearers may catch the voice of God speaking out of a different Zion, and speaking to the whole world. When a



comfortable bourgeois congregation meets in some Western suburbia, they almost alone of all the comfortable bourgeois of the suburbs are regularly exposed to the reading of a non-bourgeois book questioning fundamental assumptions of their society. But since none of us can read the Scriptures without cultural blinkers of some sort, the great advantage, the crowning excitement which our own era of Church history has over all others is the possibility that we may be able to read them together. Never before has the Church looked so much like the great multitude whom no man can number out of every nation and tribe and people and tongue. Never before, therefore, has there been so much potentiality p. 233 for mutual enrichment and self-criticism, as God causes yet more light and truth to break forth from His word.<sup>13</sup>

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Professor Andrew Walls is Head of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. p. 234

# Identity Crisis in the African Church

By Ngoni Sengwe

*Reprinted from Evangelical Missions Quarterly, April 1981, with permission*

*This article penetrates some of the causes for the rise of the independent Church movement in Africa which is seeking to relate supernatural Christianity to African world views.*

Statistics show that Africa will become a Christian continent by A.D.2000.<sup>1</sup> To some people this may sound unbelievable, but it is true. The church is booming. But while the Christian world is shouting hallelujah for such growth, there is a hidden weakness in this growth.

For instance, David Barrett, a Nairobi researcher, states that this strong surge of growth is tied to the independent church movement in Africa. Barrett estimates that there are 6,000 or more independent churches in Africa, with South Africa alone accounting for more than 3,000 of them. The Kimbanguist Church of Zaire is probably the largest with about three million members. These churches are growing at the rate of 100 every year in Africa. Probably, one out of every twelve African Christians is affiliated with an African Independent Church.<sup>2</sup> These churches are independent from mission domination and control; they are nonliturgical congregations, adopting and adapting Christianity where they will with real cultural impact.

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<sup>13</sup> I am grateful for permission to quote here some sentences from my paper 'African and Christian identity' which appeared in the Mennonite Journal *Mission Focus* and was reprinted in W. R. Shenk (ed.) *Mission focus; current issues*, Scottdale, Penna. 1980.

<sup>1</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo. 'An African Leader Looks at the Churches' Crises', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, July 1978, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> Independent church may include one congregation. The words *mission church*, *older church*, *historical church* are used interchangeably.



However, missions and mainline denominations have ignored these churches for various reasons: (1) The independent churches are not in 'the camp'. They have been founded by Africans rather than by foreign missionaries and therefore have no connection with the mainline denominations. (2) They are 'foreign' because their structures and worship patterns may not be in line with the Protestant tradition. (3) The mainline denominations are suspicious and cautious because of the dangers of syncretism.

What all this means is that the independent churches have been left to find their own way, develop their own forms, possibly even drift from solid teaching in the Bible, and struggle for a sense of continuity with the total church movement in Africa. This in turn has led the mainline churches to pull back again further. The result: a circle continuously repeating itself. In fact, Martin A. L. Daneel, who has done [p. 235](#) some extensive work among the independent churches in Zimbabwe, has concluded that these churches 'developed under circumstances in which the individual was searching for his own identity.'<sup>3</sup>

## DEFINITION OF AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH

The concept of the independent church movement is a paradox itself and difficult to delineate. At one point, one can find churches like the Cherubim and Seraphim of Nigeria whose prophets probably used the same powers as the traditional diviners. Religious experience supersedes the Bible. At another point, there is the African Apostolic Church of John Maranke that uses the Bible in its ministry but also emphasizes healing. Then at another point there is African Brotherhood Church of Kenya that broke away from the African Inland Church but still maintains some of its forms and structure. The major difference is that it is controlled totally by Africans.

The problem is how to differentiate what is a genuine independent church and what is not. The first task is to define what is an independent church. Is it one that is outside the mainline church, but founded on an African initiative? Barrett, in his book *Schism and Renewal in Africa* adequately defines independency as:

The formation and existence within a tribe or tribal unit, temporarily or permanently, of any organized religious movement with a distinct name and membership, even as small as a single organized congregation, which claims the title Christian in that it acknowledges Jesus Christ as Lord, and which has either separated by secession from a mission church or an existing African independent church, or has been founded outside the mission churches as a new kind of religious entity under African initiative and leadership.<sup>4</sup>

It appears, then, that the independent churches can be renewal movements that are basically Christian, whether or not they remain within the mission church structure.<sup>5</sup> Herbert V. Klem, former missionary to Nigeria and now professor in cross-cultural communications, describes the independent churches as 'reform movements which are meeting the unpaid bills of the historical churches.' That is, they are meeting the felt needs of the African believers that the [p. 236](#) historical churches have traditionally ignored, or of which they have not been aware.

Various attempts have been made to try to classify the independent churches. There are two major groups: The Ethiopian Churches and Zionist or Aladura Churches.

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<sup>3</sup> M. L. Daneel, *Zionism and Faith. Healing in Rhodesia* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1970), p.57.

<sup>4</sup> David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.50.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the East African Revival remained within the mainline denominations.

Ethiopian churches stress independence, but their structure resembles that of the 'mother' mainline church. African Brotherhood Church of Kenya is one of the churches in the former category.

The Zionist Churches emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit, healing, prophecy and revelation. Healing is one of the major tenets of the Zionist Churches.

This emphasis on healing is especially dominant in the rural areas where most of the churches can be found. The traditional African believes that sickness is a deep religious problem and therefore can best be met in the church, but the mission-established churches do not recognize this part of the culture. The prophets of the independent church movement in a sense take the place of a diviner of the traditional society. The prophets accept the authority of the Bible and the traditional world view. But this tie goes further. There is a tendency among the Zionist churches to be legalistic. For example, the Old Testament has a special place in these churches because of its cultural relativity. For the traditional African, it is only natural to hold to the Levitical dietary laws and rules for fasting. Africans can easily identify with the Hebrew life, for the 'Old Testament breathes the nomadic and pastoral life; man's frank and outspoken longing for offspring; the experience of seed-time and harvest; the concreteness of all that is said about God and man'.<sup>6</sup>

## CAUSES OF THE INDEPENDENT CHURCH MOVEMENT

Why is there such schism in the African church? There is no one answer. Different people have looked at the causes from different angles. Some see the growth of independent churches as political, while others see it as a sociological problem.

Barrett states that the independent church movement is a result of a clash of cultures, because these churches usually started in areas where the conflict between Christianity, Western culture and traditional culture and religion was intense. Most missionaries had an inadequate understanding of traditional African society. As a result, they attacked some elements of African culture about which biblical faith [p. 237](#) was silent. The people discovered the discrepancy when the Scriptures were translated into their vernacular. The reaction began when people read the Scriptures themselves, S. G. A. Ose Onibere, a Nigerian theologian, says that the independent church movement 'represents the anti-Western reaction of national Christians to their varied encounters with Western injustice, discrimination, paternalism and segregation. African converts came to discover the missions attacked traditional institutions they held dear—institutions which the Bible did not proscribe'. He adds: 'These same missions were seen to have overstepped their biblical authority.'<sup>7</sup>

African historians like Madziwanyika Tsomondo, a Zimbabwean and an associate professor of history at the University of Maryland, argue that the independent church movement arose out of cultural nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

The conflict is not so much between Christianity and African culture, as between indigenous African culture and Western culture. While independent churches espouse

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<sup>6</sup> G.C. Oosthuizen, *Post Christianity in Africa* (London: Hurst, 1968), p.165.

<sup>7</sup> S.G.A. Ose Onibere, 'Phenomenon of African Religious independency', *Missiology*, January 1979, p.115.

<sup>8</sup> Madziwanyika Tsomondo, 'Against Alienism: The Response of the Zionist and the Apostolic African independent 'Christian' Church Movements to European Colonialism in Zimbabwe', *Journal of Southern African Affairs*, 4:13, January, 1979.

cultural nationalism, this doesn't necessarily mean political liberation.<sup>9</sup> The movement is a crusade against not only Western values, but also forms.

For example, the independent churches often try to vindicate African culture by showing that it is closer to the biblical way of life, especially that of the Old Testament. Africans can easily relate with Israel's struggle for identity as a nation and as a people of God. For instance, most of the Zionist churches de-emphasize education because they thought missionaries ran the schools with a proselytizing objective. They viewed medical missions as an 'entering wedge' or a bait to trap Africans to accept Western culture. Hence, they relied on divine healing that was administered by the prophets. Almost all Zionist churches do not have paid ministers, elaborate church buildings or seminaries as do the mainline churches. The movements, however, do accept the Scriptures and take pains to demonstrate that there is no conflict between traditional African culture and the Bible.

Another reason for the upsurge of the independent churches was the attitude of some of the missionaries toward African religion. They thought that African religion would collapse with the coming of Western medicine and education. However, they were not aware of p. 238 the African's holistic world view and the functions of traditional religion. For the African, traditional religion was an interwoven part of the social structure. It could not be isolated from the rest of the culture. By suppressing one feature such as traditional religion, by force, the Westerners ended up destroying the whole society. Nevertheless, there were some countries in Africa where schism was avoided. Marshall Murphree, author of *Christianity and the Shona*, attributes the lack of the independent movement in Botswana to missionary strategy. The tribal leaders who are the opinion-makers in the community, were converted at the beginning of the ministry.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Christianity became the official religion of that tribe.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN WORLD VIEWS

While there could be an element of truth in all these arguments, they are but a simplistic approach to a complex problem. At best, they are but parts of a complex whole. The underlying feature of their whole is the African world view. The adherents to the independent church movement are seeking primarily to restore the whole, especially the place of the supernatural.

Most missionaries expected the African Christians to reject all their traditional beliefs and rituals, especially those pertaining to ancestral worship. They expected these Africans to reject their world view. But a people's world view cannot be destroyed. Says Victor Hayward in *African Independent Churches*: "Traditional churches have failed to provide the African with a Christian world view to replace the one he has lost, with the result that in times of crisis he is very liable to fall back upon heathen attitudes and customs, simply because he understands these, but does not know what he ought to think or do as a Christian in such a situation".<sup>11</sup>

The Western approach to the gospel often was too intellectual in its catechism and organized services that did not appeal to the traditional Africans. The daily problems of witchcraft, sorcery and ancestor worship were on the whole ignored. When such cases

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<sup>9</sup> Tsomondo, p.10

<sup>10</sup> Marshall W. Murphree, *Christianity and the Shona* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), p.163.

<sup>11</sup> Victor E. W. Hayward, ed., *African Independent Church Movements* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1963), p.10.

were faced, some mission churches merely disciplined the believer. In few cases was there any serious dialogue.

Indeed something must replace what has been lost, Aspects of p. 239 African traditional religion could have been used as steps towards explaining the gospel.

The close association between the traditional world view and the beliefs and practices of the independent churches make some theologians suspicious. Bengt Sundkler in his famous book, *The Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, concludes that independent churches are a religious movement bent on a return to the pagan religious past.

For example, the fast growing Aladura ('the church that prays') Churches of West Africa have pastors who are both healers and prophets. They do not use Western medicine. 'The important and definite aspect of Christianity for Aladura is not belief in a creed but the experience of deliverance through a restored relationship with God and Jesus Christ'.<sup>12</sup> Some of these though have developed some questionable doctrines in an attempt to achieve 'cultural integrity and spiritual autonomy.'<sup>13</sup>

Further, some of the faith-healers seem to invoke the same powers as the traditional diviners do. For example, it is not unusual for a Zionist prophet to prescribe some countermeasures against witchcraft and sorcery that are very similar to the ones the medicine man recommends.

There is always the danger of syncretism if there is no proper spiritual leader. One temptation that looms in most independent churches is that the Bible tends to have a secondary place in the life of the church. Religious experience becomes the authority.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRIDGE THE GAP

The gap between African independent churches and the mainline churches can be bridged by observing one of the basic communication principles: starting at the point of understanding. Granted, there are elements in the independent church movement that are questionable, but what good will it do to the body of Christ to major in the nonissues? It can only help the chasm widen. With that in mind, I make the following suggestions:

1. The mainline churches ought to recognize the good that is in some of the movements. Some church leaders, like Tokunboh Adeyemo, secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), claim that the growth of the movement stems from a theological malnutrition. Says Adeyemo in *Christianity Today* p. 240 (July 20, 1979): 'Theological deficiency of churches in Africa has led to the rise of many sects, heresies, cults and numerous other false movements all over the continent.'<sup>14</sup> Adeyemo, however, seems to be giving a very simplistic cause. In the first place, most of these independent churches have been started by lay people, many of whom are not theologians and have very little formal education. Daniel Iselaiye, Nigerian teacher and pastor, maintains that these churches grew out of a need that was not met in older churches. 'The independent churches have set out to integrate Christianity with the best in traditional religion,' Iselaiye states. They do it by chanting the Psalms, dancing in worship and reciting biblical history. Consequently, people can identify with them.

2. Most of the mainline churches need to restore the sense of the supernatural. Fortunately, there are a few pastors ministering in this vital area. One of them is Simon

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Cameron Mitchell, *African Primal Religions* (Niles, Illinois, Argus Communications, 1977), p.90.

<sup>13</sup> Harold Turner, quoted in *Schism and Renewal* by David Barrett, p.95.

<sup>14</sup> Tokunboh Adeyemo, 'The African Church Struggles in Her Third Century', *Christianity Today*, July 20, 1979, p.16.

Mundeta of the United Church of Christ in the Chipinga District of Zimbabwe. He is a chaplain at Chikore Hospital. With the help of his wife, he interviews patients whom he detects may be possessed by evil spirits. There is a public burning of amulets dedicated to the ancestral spirits. He and his wife sing hymns to the spirits. They expel the spirits through prayer and the laying on of hands. 'In this way,' observes Daneel, 'an attempt is made to represent the sovereignty of Christ in as concrete a manner as possible to those who need much more than mere medicine treatment.'<sup>15</sup>

3. Since the independent churches tend to emphasize the Old Testament, it can be used as a tool to explain the gospel. The Old Testament has cultural similarities with those of traditional Africans. In the past, the mission churches have ignored and neglected the Old Testament. The Old Testament can be the most effective tool to reach the traditional Africans with the gospel. Having introduced the gospel through the use of the Old Testament, one can proceed to teach the New Testament. Temba Mafico, a Zimbabwean theologian, argues that the ignorance or neglect of the Old Testament has produced slow and superficial results.<sup>16</sup>

One of the ways of showing that Christianity is not a white man's religion is by having a culturally African church. A group of Christians among the Yoruba of Nigeria proved that it would be done. They chanted the book of Hebrews to a Yoruba art style. The Yoruba art p. 241 style gave it an African identity. Yoruba tradition says that the composer is the owner of the song. Therefore, the Yoruba owned the gospel. The non-Christian Yoruba people knew that no white man would have been able to compose it.

4. Church growth specialists have advocated the concept of the three selfs: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. It is time to add another self: self-identifying. Self-identifying seems to be the cry of the independent church movement in Africa. Self-identifying comes by recognizing the good aspects of each culture and trying to root the church in African soil. Reflecting on the leadership pattern in independent churches, Daneel said: 'The centrality and near-deification of the main leader result from efforts to relate the Christian message to the African world of thought and belief, in a manner the white missionary was not capable of. Leadership position links him with the socio-political situation.'<sup>17</sup>

African theologians concede that there are weaknesses in some of the indigenous churches. But they are quick to point out their accomplishments. Says Onibere: 'In these independent churches God has at last spoken a language intelligible to the Africans'. The result has been indigenous churches 'with local leaders, adapting liturgy to culturally acceptable worship patterns, meeting the physical needs of the people with healing ministries ... and promoting the communitarian character of traditional African society.'<sup>18</sup>

5. The phenomenal growth of the indigenous churches, which Barrett concludes is 'unparalleled in the entire history of the expansion of Christianity,' reflects a gap between the mission church concept of Christianity and the African one. Dialogue or interaction is necessary in order to bridge the gap. Most mission churches have nursed a negative attitude towards independent churches. Each side needs to listen to the other.

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<sup>15</sup> Daneel, p.58.

<sup>16</sup> Temba Mafico, 'The Contribution of the Old Testament to Missionary Effectiveness in Africa', *Missiology*, January, 1979, pp.110-111.

<sup>17</sup> Daneel, p.57

<sup>18</sup> Ose Onibere, *Missiology*, p.115.



6. Historical churches cannot overlook the areas of need, such as solid Bible teaching in most independent churches. Change comes slowly, but through a meaningful dialogue both groups can learn and minister to each other.

## CONCLUSION

From these churches may spring the renewal that will bring Africa into evangelicalism. On the other hand, it might swing the other way. As **P.242** long as mission churches ignore these independents, they may be curtailing a solid growth process much needed in the harvest. As it is now, as long as the historical churches steer away from the independent churches and refuse to communicate the gospel in cultural patterns understood by the Africans, there will be a growing number of churches that could swing either way, to the evangelical or to some other position.

It may well be that missionaries and national Christians must allow these churches to find their own level of worship. The mission churches may have to learn to tolerate what appears to be contrary to the way Christianity was introduced by the Western missionaries and test them on the true Spirit of Christ and not on the Western spirit of culture.

There is every possibility that these 6,000-plus churches could become a mainspring for the future of African Christianity. But if they are pushed off, isolated, and left alone with no continuity with other church groups and missions, they may move into an indigenous form of old worship that will probably have no semblance of Christianity.

Mission churches should reach out to these independent churches to fellowship with and to show them the love of Christ. Historical churches must prove their viability and make the gospel appear intelligible, while demonstrating its message in life and action.

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**Dr. Ngoni Sengwe was born in Zimbabwe. He studied theology in Africa and the U.S.A. and gained his Ph.D in communications from the University of Iowa. **p. 243****

# The Church and its Theology

Tite Tienou

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*This summary of a message given at the General Assembly of AEAM held in Malawi in 1981 speaks of the importance of Biblical theology for the African Church.*

## INTRODUCTION—DEFINITION

It is more than appropriate to devote this General Assembly to the Church and its varied ministries in our continent. Although some may think of the Church as a dispensable institution, we are properly concerned with building and nurturing Christ's Church and enabling her to carry out her ministry in the world with due honour and glory to her Lord! This is, must always be, our highest concern because it is the Lord's!

In the Church's life, worship and ministry, theology is essential, if not primary. But the kind of theology I am advocating should not be confused with the speculations and sterile debates that are current in theological circles. Rather it is theology as an integral part of the Christian ministry with the purpose of 'perfecting the saints ... edifying the body of Christ' ([Eph. 4:12](#)). Theology is therefore knowing God in order to serve Him. For

'Theology as the disciplined ... reflection/action of knowing God is never theology if it is less than functional, carrying out God's plan through His people in His world'

(Conn 1977:106).<sup>1</sup>

The Church's theological task in Africa today is to develop a functional theology which is faithful to God's revealed Word. Without such theology the Church becomes anaemic and may be paralysed.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose in this brief paper is not to pontificate a theology for us but rather to explore some of the obstacles which need to be overcome before we can develop a truly functional Evangelical theology (no! Evangelical *theologies*) in Africa. Central to the entire endeavour is the matter of hermeneutics which will be treated in the second part. [p. 244](#)

## **OBSTACLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN AFRICA**

I have elsewhere explored some of the internal dangers facing Evangelical theology in Africa. I will not burden you by repeating the same here but let me simply summarize my thinking and attempt to sharpen our focus. There are basically four problem areas which cause Evangelical theology to be at a standstill in Africa at the present time: (1) Mistrust of theology (2) Sacerdotalism (3) An ahistorical faith and (4) Denominational individualism.

By mistrust of Theology I mean a lack of confidence in theology based on the assumption that theologians inspire more doubt than trust in God and His word. This is expressed by the claim to have no other theology than the pure and simple Word of God.

By sacerdotalism I mean a trust in the religious specialist to the point that what he says can be thought more important than doctrinal formulations or even the Bible.

By an ahistorical faith I mean a lack of awareness of the history of the Christian Church or doctrine. We tend to think that we owe no one anything (theologically and doctrinally speaking). We are insufficiently aware of the 'great clouds of witnesses' who have gone before us and also of the present enriching diversity in Evangelism.

By denominational individualism I mean a sense of self-righteousness which causes us to think that *we* alone have the true faith. Consequently, cooperation in the theological task is one of the most difficult to achieve in Africa today. We do not want to be contaminated by someone else's doctrines.

These four factors combined with outside ones can ruin the theology of the Church. First, we should recognise that theology is for the whole Church, not just a chosen *elite*. Secondly, theology is concerned with communicating meaning so that Christians may be

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<sup>1</sup> Conn, Harvie M. 'Contextualisation: Where Do we Begin?' in *Evangelicals and Liberation* 1977 C. E. Armerding, ed; (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House).

<sup>2</sup> Schoonhoven, E. Jansen *Exchange* No. 25 (Special issue on the Bible in Africa) 1980.

mature in Christ. Thirdly, the meaning of God's word is obtained by appropriate hermeneutics.

## **THE WHOLE CHURCH IS CALLED TO THEOLOGY**

Theology as knowing God through a better understanding of His word cannot be reserved for the specially trained only. Indeed the whole church when she is obedient to God practices theology. I know that since the 1973 General Assembly we have in the AEAM, placed more emphasis on higher training for the ministry. This is a welcome necessity; but we must not think that a greater number of highly trained professionals is going to be the guarantee for sound Evangelical theology in Africa. Theology is always in and of the Church. Singularly **P. 245** that means that the Bible should be known, understood and practised in our churches. It should not be just a book of reference! The Word of God will exercise its rightful control on our theology when we focus on sense (meaning) rather than sound (form).

## **THEOLOGY IS COMMUNICATING SENSE TOWARD MATURITY**

It is commonplace to deplore the superficiality of African Christianity and the lack of maturity of many of our Christians. May I suggest that the reason is partially because we tend to focus on *sound* more than *sense*? Let me explain what I mean. We tend to be preoccupied with the proper stating of doctrines rather than the meanings those doctrines convey to our Christians. This explains the disparity between what we say we believe and what we actually practice.

Likewise in our teaching, both in church and in our theological institutions, we tend to satisfy ourselves with the knowledge of the proper information, the proper contents of the Bible. But we often miss the all-important factor: the meaning. We should not therefore be surprised that we have built a hollow Christianity, a Christianity of meaningless words! Sense, not sound, must be our theological aim. The understanding of the intended sense of scripture will go a long way toward the maturity of our people.

## **HERMENEUTICS IS THE KEY TO SENSE**

Before one attempts to communicate sense or meaning, the meaning must first be discovered. Hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of God's Word revealed in the Bible so that the message and purposes intended by God are understood by our contemporaries as they should have been by the first hearers or readers. Hermeneutics is therefore much more than an academic exercise; it is at the heart of the process of communicating the Gospel. This is why many, like B. Jansen Schoonhoven, feel that hermeneutics is going to be the key issue in the Evangelical-Ecumenical debate for the coming years in Africa (1980:45). Evangelical theologians need to sharpen their hermeneutical tools.

Hermeneutics being a complex issue, it cannot be properly treated here. The focus of hermeneutics for us is not, however, the philosophical discourse so prevalent in so much of the writing on the subject. Rather, it is on the question: how does one's interpretation preserve the normative character of Scripture in theology? Such hermeneutics will constantly ask the two questions singled out by Harvie Conn as basic to a contextual ministry: **p. 246**

'How are the divine demands of the gospel of the Kingdom communicated in cultural thought forms meaningful to the real issues and needs of the person and his society in that

point of cultural time? How shall the man of God, a member of the body of Christ and the fellowship of the spirit, respond meaningfully and with integrity to the Scripture so that he may live a full-orbed kingdom life-style in covenant obedience with the covenant community?' (1977:104).

Hermeneutics, like theology, is therefore the task of the entire people of God, not just the specialist. It is a process which should provide a better understanding of Scripture thereby resulting in fruitful theologizing. No one method of interpretation can be set *a priori* as the Evangelical method. Biblical revelation is a multi-faceted word demanding multi-faceted methods in order to get the proper meaning. Here, as always in theology, the whole church must constantly question and challenge if need be, the findings of the specialist.

## CONCLUSION

Evangelical theology is at a crossroads in Africa today. Left to its present situation it can develop monstrous heresies because of its lack of grappling with the pressing issues. The Bible, at the present a closed book for many, when properly understood is the sure way of rectifying the present mistakes!

Theology, having as its aim the maturing of all God's children, is not a luxury for us. It is a necessity! Theology is the foundation of the Church's life and ministry because it is the communication of knowing God. Theology will help build the Church if the whole Church reflects on God's word in a discipleship posture.

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**The Rev. Tite Tienou has served as pastor and teacher in Upper Volta. He is Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM). At present he is completing a Ph.D in the U.S.A. p. 247**

## The Homogeneous Unit Principle—A Revaluation

*Koinonia, or fellowship, is an essential element of the nature of the Christian Church. It cannot be isolated from the vertical dimension of Latreia, worship. The issues of Koinonia are complex. For example, how would you react, as an educated, well-dressed, middle class Christian, when a dirty, uncouth, evil-smelling villager came and sat next to you in your Sunday morning worship? To take an actual but typical case from India: what did the high caste Brahmin converts do when the low caste untouchables flooded the church spilling out through the door? They literally jumped out through the church windows! Thus, in spite of Jesus' high priestly prayer, 'that they all may be one', the tension between the universal communion of saints and the identity of a local congregation remains unsolved. One answer in recent times has been the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) of the Church Growth movement.*

*A colloquium on the HUP was held under the auspices of the Lausanne Theology and Education Group, from May 31 to June 2, 1977, in Pasadena, California. Five faculty members of the Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission prepared advance papers on the*

*methodological, anthropological, historical, ethical and theological implications of the HUP, and five participants responded; these papers and responses were then debated with a further 25 consultants. The findings of the colloquium are published by the LCWE as Occasional Paper No. 1.*

*At the colloquium, Donald McGavran defined the HUP as a section of society in which all members have some characteristics in common such as geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, vocational or economical, or a combination of several of these factors. This common characteristic makes them all feel at home with each other, gives them a group identity in terms of 'we', in distinction to 'they'. Following the spirit of Lausanne, the colloquium obviously stressed the evangelistic implications of the HUP.*

*The following articles in the section on Mission and Evangelism reopen the debate on the HUP, not only because of its continued significance, but also because several fresh evaluations of the HUP are now available.*

*Perhaps one of the best exegetical studies relevant to the issue is that of René Padilla, and so we start with his rather substantial criticism of the HUP. This is followed by a new defence by Donald McGavran himself. Then two concrete cases, each exemplifying the issues discussed are appended.*

*We invite our readers to respond with articles or letters to the Editor.*

Sunand Sumithra p. 248

# **The Nature and Mission of the Church: The Case for Unity**

**C. René Padilla**

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Throughout the entire New Testament the oneness of the people of God as a oneness that transcends all outward distinctions is taken for granted. The thought is that with the coming of Jesus Christ all the barriers that divide humankind have been broken down and a new humanity is now taking shape *in* and *through* the church. God's purpose in Jesus Christ includes the oneness of the human race, and that oneness becomes visible in the church. In the first part of this article we shall examine the New Testament teaching on the oneness of the church in which God's purpose to unite all things in Jesus Christ is expressed. In the second part we shall examine the historical unfolding of God's purpose of unity in apostolic times. Finally, in the last part, we shall evaluate Donald McGavran's homogeneous unit principle, according to which 'men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers,'<sup>1</sup> in the light of our previous analysis of scripture teaching and apostolic practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p.108.



## 1. GOD'S PURPOSE OF UNITY IN JESUS CHRIST

The Bible knows nothing of the human being as an individual in isolation; it knows only of a person as a *related* being, a person in relation to other people. Much of its teaching is colored by the Hebrew concept of human solidarity, for which H. Wheeler Robinson coined a well-worn label—'corporate personality'. Accordingly, the church is viewed in the New Testament as the solidarity that has been created in Jesus Christ and that stands in contrast with the old humanity represented by Adam. The Adam-solidarity is humankind under the judgement of God. Its oneness is a oneness of sin and death. But where sin abounded, grace has abounded all the more. As a result, the Adam-solidarity can no longer be viewed in isolation from Christ's world, in which God has justified sinners. Over against the darkness of death that fell upon humanity through the first Adam, the light of life has broken into the world through the last Adam ([Rom. 5:12–21](#)). By means [p. 249](#) of the first Adam, the kingdom of death was established among humankind; humanity as a whole slipped into the void of meaningless existence out of fellowship with God and under his judgement. By means of the last Adam, a new humanity comes into existence, in which the results of the fall are undone and God's original purpose for humanity is fulfilled.

The letter to the Ephesians assembles a number of insights regarding the new humanity brought into being by Jesus Christ. It opens with a doxology ([1:3–14](#)) in which the unity of Jew and Gentile in the church is viewed in the light of God's eternal purpose, which includes the creation of a new order with Christ as the head. The whole universe is depicted as intended by God to be 'summed up' or 'recapitulated' in Christ, moving towards an *anakephalaiosis*—a harmony in which 'all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ.'<sup>2</sup> In that context, the unity of Jew and Gentile (vv.[13–14](#)) can only be understood as a proleptic fulfillment of that which God is to accomplish in the 'fulness of time' (v.[10](#)).

Both Jews and Gentiles may now receive the seal of the Spirit by faith. Circumcision, which in former days was the sign of participation in the Abrahamic covenant, in the new order becomes irrelevant—it is merely an outward sign and it has been superseded by the 'circumcision made without hands' ([Col. 2:11](#)). With the coming of Christ, 'neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' ([Gal. 6:15](#) cf. [5:6](#)). God has brought into being a new humanity in which the barriers that separated the Gentiles from the Jews are broken down ([Eph. 2:11](#) ff.). Out of the two large homogeneous units whose enmity was proverbial in the ancient world God has made *one*; two enemies have been reconciled in 'one body' (v.[16](#)). In his death Jesus Christ removed the wall that stood between the two systems under which 'the people' (*am*) and 'the nations' (*goyim*) had lived in former days. Now both Jews and Gentiles stand as equal in the presence of God (v. [18](#)), as members of a new fellowship that may be described as a city, a family, and a building (vv.[19–20](#)). Thus the unity that God wills for the entire universe according to the first chapter of Ephesians becomes historically visible in a community where reconciliation both to God and to one another is possible on the basis of Christ's work.

Further on, in chapter [3](#), Paul claims that God's purpose of unity in Jesus Christ has been made known to him 'by revelation' (v.[3](#)). He is a steward of a 'mystery' that was hitherto faintly perceived but that has [p. 250](#) now been revealed, namely, that in Christ 'the nations' have a share in the blessings of the gospel, together with 'the people', on the common ground of God's grace. Unmistakably, the unity of Jew and Gentile is here said to be *the gospel*,—not simply a result that should take place as the church is 'perfected', but

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<sup>2</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1961), p.33.

an essential aspect of the kerygma that the apostle proclaimed on the basis of Scripture (vv.8–9). Furthermore, it is conceived as an object lesson of God’s manifold wisdom, displayed for the instruction of the inhabitants of the celestial realms, both good and evil (v.10).

The unity resulting from Christ’s work is not an abstract unity but a new community in which *life in Christ* becomes the decisive factor. The only peoplehood that has validity in the new order is that related to the church as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1 Pet. 2:9). Although made up of Jews and Gentiles, the church is placed together with Jews and Greeks (non-Jews), as a third group (1 Cor. 10:32). It is viewed as ‘the seed of Abraham’ in which, since one is incorporated without any conditions apart from faith in Jesus Christ, ‘there is neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor freeman’, for all are one (*heis*) in Christ (Gal. 3:28). No one would, on the basis of this passage, suggest that Gentiles have to become Jews, females have to become males, and slaves have to become free in order to share in the blessings of the gospel. But no justice is done to the text unless it is taken to mean that in Jesus Christ a new reality has come into being—a unit based on faith in him, in which membership is in no way dependent upon race, social status, or sex. No mere ‘spiritual’ unity, but a concrete community made up of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women, all of them as equal members of the Christ-solidarity—that is the thrust of the passage. And, as Donald Guthrie puts it, ‘Paul is not expressing a hope, but a fact.’<sup>3</sup>

A similar idea is conveyed again in Colossians 3:11, where Paul states that for those who have been incorporated into the new humanity created in Jesus Christ, the divisions that affect the old humanity have become irrelevant: ‘Here there cannot be Gentile and Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all.’ Race loses its importance because all the believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, belong to the ‘Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16). Religious background is neither here nor there because ‘the true circumcision’ (Phil. 3:3) is made up of Jews who are Jews inwardly, whose circumcision is ‘real circumcision ... a matter of the heart, p. 251 spiritual and not literal’ (Rom. 2:28–29). Social stratifications are beside the point because in the new humanity the slave becomes his own master’s ‘beloved brother’ (Philem. v.15); the slave is called to serve the Lord and not humankind (Col. 3:22) and the free person is to live as one who has a Master in heaven (Col. 4:11). Here—in the corporate new human, in the new homogeneous unit that has been brought into being in Jesus Christ—the only thing that matters is that ‘Christ is all and in all’. Those who have been baptized ‘into one body’ (1 Cor. 12:13) are members of a community in which the differences that separate people in the world have become obsolete. It may be true that ‘men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers’, but that is irrelevant. Membership in the body of Christ is not a question of likes or dislikes, but a question of incorporation into a new humanity under the lordship of Christ. Whether a person likes it or not, the same act that reconciles one to God *simultaneously* introduces the person into a community where people find their identity in Jesus Christ rather than in their race, culture, social class, or sex, and are consequently reconciled to one another. ‘The unifier is Jesus Christ and the unifying principle is the “Gospel”.’<sup>4</sup>

God’s purpose is to bring the universe ‘into a unity in Christ’ (Eph. 1:10, NEB). That purpose is yet to be consummated. But *already*, in anticipation of the end, a new humanity has been created in Jesus Christ and those who are incorporated in him form a unit

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Guthrie, *Galatians* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1969), p.115.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Mackay, *God’s Order: The Ephesian Letter and the Present Time* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1953), p.84.

wherein all the divisions that separate people in the old humanity are done away with. The original unity of the human race is thus restored; God's purpose of unity in Jesus Christ is thus made historically visible.

## II. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AND THE APOSTOLIC PRACTICE

A cursory examination of the New Testament shows the way in which the teaching on the new unity of the church developed in the foregoing section was implemented by the apostles. Furthermore, it brings into focus the difficulties that the early church faced as it sought to live in the light of God's purpose of unity in Jesus Christ. The breaking down of the barriers between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, and between male and female, could no more be taken for granted in the first century than the breaking of the barriers between black and white, between rich and poor, and between male and female today. But all the New Testament evidence points to an apostolic P. 252 practice consistent with the aim of forming churches in which God's purpose would become a concrete reality.

### JESUS' EXAMPLE

The apostles had no need to speculate as to what a community in which loyalty to Jesus Christ relativized all the differences would look like; they could look back to the community that Jesus had gathered around himself during his earthly ministry. True, he had not demanded a rigidly structured uniformity, yet he had attained the formation of a community that had been held together by a common commitment to him, in the face of which all the differences that could have separated them had been overcome. Members of the revolutionary party (like 'Simon who was called the Zealot,' [Lk. 6:15](#)) had become one with 'publicans'—private businessmen in charge of collecting taxes for the government of the occupying power (like Matthew, in [Mt. 9:9-13](#); cf. [Lk. 19:1-10](#)). Humble women of dubious reputation (cf. [Lk. 7:36-39](#)) had mixed with wealthy women whose economic means made the travelling ministry of Jesus and his followers possible ([Lk. 8:1-3](#)). Women had been accepted on the same basis as men, despite the common view, expressed by Josephus, that a woman 'is in every respect of less worth than a man.'<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, Jesus had limited his mission to the Jews and had imposed the same limitation to his apostles before his resurrection. Yet, as Jeremias has demonstrated, he had anticipated that the Gentiles would share in the revelation given to Israel and would participate in God's people.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, he had commanded his disciples to proclaim the gospel to 'all nations'; the Gentile mission was to be the means through which the Gentiles would be accepted as guests at God's table ([Mt. 8:11](#); cf. [Isa. 25:6-8](#)).

### THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

On the day of Pentecost, the gospel was proclaimed to a large multitude of pilgrims that had come to Jerusalem for the great Jewish Feast of the Weeks ([Acts 2:1-13](#)). The heterogeneous nature of the multitude is stressed in the narrative by reference to the variety of languages (vv. [6-8](#)) and lands and cultures (vv. [9-11](#)) represented among them.

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<sup>5</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1971), pp.223ff.

<sup>6</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (London: SCM Press, 1958).

Granted that the ‘devout men’ (*andres eulabeis*) mentioned in verse 5 should be taken as Jews rather than as Gentile God-fearers, the fact **p. 253** that Luke wants to press home upon us is that ‘every nation under heaven’ was represented and that the mighty works of God were proclaimed in the indigenous languages and dialects of many lands. The worldwide proclamation of the gospel—the proclamation to be portrayed in the succeeding chapters of Acts—was thus anticipated in one single event in which even the linguistic barriers were miraculously broken down for the sake of the spread of the gospel ‘to the end of the earth’ (1:8). The point here is that at Pentecost people became Christian with people from ‘every nation under heaven’ (2:5), including ‘visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes’ (v.10). Accordingly, Peter understood Pentecost—the gift of the Spirit—as the means whereby the promise of the gospel (that ‘all the nations of the earth should be blessed,’ [Gen. 12:3](#)) was extended not only to those present but also to their descendants as well as to ‘all that are far off’ (v.39).

The Christian community that resulted from Pentecost was, of course, made up mainly of Jewish Christians. What else could be expected before the Gentile mission? Yet, it would be a great mistake to conclude that it was in their Jewishness that they found their identity. No racial homogeneity, but Pentecost, was the basis of their unity. Only in the light of the outpouring of the Spirit are we able to understand how it was possible for the early Jerusalem church to include in its constituency ‘unlearned and ignorant men’ (*agrammatoi ... kai idiotai*, [Acts 4:13](#); ‘*amme ha-aretz*, people of the land,’ according to rabbinical terminology), and educated priests (6:7), and, at a later stage, Pharisees (15:5; cf. 11:2); poor people in need of help and wealthy landlords (2:44–45; 4:32–37), possibly members of a well-to-do foreign community;<sup>7</sup> Jews (Aramaic-speaking, most of them natives of Palestine), ‘Hellenists’ (Greek-speaking Jews from the Dispersion) (6:1ff.), and at least one Gentile from Syrian Antioch (v.5).

Luke’s record shows that the basic ecclesiastical unit for both preaching and teaching was the house church ([Acts 2:46](#); 5:42; cf. 12:2, 17; 21:18). But there is nothing in Acts to support the view that ‘the mixed church at Jerusalem divided along homogeneous unit lines,’<sup>8</sup> or to lead us as much as to imagine that there were different house churches for the educated and for the uneducated, for the rich **p. 254** and for the poor, for the Palestinian Jews and for the Jews from the Dispersion. All the evidence points in the opposite direction. One of Luke’s main emphases as he describes the church growing out of Pentecost is, in fact, that the believers were ‘together’ (*epi to auto*, with a quasi-technical sense; cf. 2:44); that they had ‘all things in common’ (2:44; 4:32); that they were ‘of one heart and soul’ (4:32). The burden of proof lies with anyone who, despite Luke’s description, continues to hold that the early church in Jerusalem was organized according to homogeneous units.

A problem that soon arose in the early Jerusalem church was due precisely to the heterogeneous nature of the community—the ‘Hellenists’ complained against the ‘Hebrews’ because their widows were not receiving a fair share from the common pool that had been formed ([Acts 6:1](#)). No clearer illustration of the way in which the apostles faced the problems of division in the church can be found than the one recorded here. A modern church-growth expert might have suggested the creation of two distinct denominations, one for Palestinian Jews and another one for Greek Jews. That would have

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<sup>7</sup> E. A. Judge, *The Social Patterns of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), p.55.

<sup>8</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Our Kind Of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), pp.122–23. If both Jews and Gentiles were divided into ‘numerous important homogenous units’ (*ibid.*, p.114), why does Wagner argue that the Jerusalem church was divided into only two groups, the Hellenists and the Hebrews?

certainly been a *practical* solution to the tensions existing between the two conflicting homogeneous units! We are told, however, that the apostles called the community together and asked them to choose seven men who would be responsible for the daily distribution (vv.2-6). The unity of the church across cultural barriers was thus preserved.

## THE CHURCH IN SYRIAN ANTIOCH

Following Stephen's martyrdom, a great persecution arose against the Jerusalem church, apparently mainly against the Hellenist believers with whom Stephen had been identified ([Acts 8:1](#)). A result of the persecution, however, was that the first large-scale evangelization outside Palestine was launched by exiles who travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch ([11:19](#)).

According to Luke's report, these exiles, aside from a few, shared the gospel with 'none except Jews' (v.19). Why so, one may ask. No explicit answer is given in the narrative, yet this statement is used by Donald McGavran to support the claim that in the years following Pentecost the church made 'early adjustments' that favoured the spread of the gospel and resulted in 'one-race congregations' that 'arose by the dozens; perhaps by the hundreds.'<sup>9</sup> Luke's record, however, does not substantiate the thesis that the apostles deliberately p. 255 promoted the formation of 'one-race congregations' and tolerated Jewish prejudices against the Gentiles for the sake of numerical church growth. In order to claim that it does, one needs to come to Scripture with the preconceived idea (1) that the apostles shared the modern theory that race prejudice 'can be understood and should be made an aid to Christianization,'<sup>10</sup> and (2) that the multiplication of the church invariably requires an adjustment to the homogeneous unit principle. Without this unwarranted assumption, one can hardly miss the point made by Acts that the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles was such a difficult step for the Jerusalem church that it took place only with the aid of visions and commands ([8:26ff](#); [10:1-16](#)) or under the pressure of persecution ([8:1ff](#); [11:19-20](#)). No suggestion is ever given that Jewish Christians preached the gospel to 'none except Jews' *because of strategic considerations*. All the evidence points to the fact that restrictions placed on the proclamation of the gospel even by Greek-speaking Jews was due to scruples that would have to be overcome (as in Peter's case when he was sent to Cornelius) if the Gentiles were to receive the Word of God and if the Jews were to see that 'God shows no partiality' (as in the case of those in Judea who heard that Cornelius and his kinsmen and friends had believed). As long as Jewish Christians allowed inherited prejudices to persist, probably because of their fear that this contact with Gentiles might be interpreted by fellow Jews as an act whereby they were 'traitorously joining a strange people' (to borrow McGavran's expression), they could only preach 'to none except the Jews'. Who would have thought that their approach, based on such a limited outlook, would be used as a pattern for evangelism in the twentieth century?

The evangelists who took the new step of preaching the gospel to Gentiles in Syrian Antioch were unnamed 'men of Cyprus and Cyrene' ([11:20](#)). The importance of this step can hardly be overestimated. Antioch was the third largest city in the world, 'almost a microcosm of Roman antiquity in the first century, a city which encompassed most of the

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<sup>9</sup> Donald McGavran, *The Clash between Christianity and Culture* (Washington, D.C. Canon Press, 1974), p.23.

<sup>10</sup> Donald McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A study in the Strategy of Missions*, (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), p.10.



advantages, the problems, and the human interests, with which the new faith would have to grapple.’<sup>11</sup> Soon the church there would become the base for the Gentile mission.

There is no evidence that those who received the gospel in Antioch were relatives to the exiles coming from Jerusalem. Perhaps they were, but this is merely a conjecture and lends no solid support to the idea [p. 256](#) that ‘in Antioch for both the Jerusalem refugees and the resident Christians we have bridges of relationship into the Greek people’.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, nothing is said by Luke to lead us to the conclusion that the evangelization of Gentiles in this city took place in the synagogue. That might have been the case, but if the correct reading in verse [20](#) is *hellenas* rather than *hellenistas*, Gentile of Greek culture would be meant. Floyd Filson may be right in believing that the evangelized were ‘Gentiles who had had no previous contact with the synagogue.’<sup>13</sup> The message that was preached to them was centered in Jesus as Lord (*Kyrios*) and was thus cast in terms not entirely unfamiliar to people living in a cosmopolitan city where salvation was being offered by many cults and mystery religions in the name of other lords. God’s power was with the evangelists and as a result many believed. Unless we are to assume that for the sake of numerical growth the ‘great number’ of those who believed were immediately separated into homogeneous unit house churches,<sup>14</sup> the clear implication is that the church that came into being embraced both Jewish and Gentile believers *on an equal basis* and that there was no thought that the latter had to accept Jewish practices as a prerequisite. At a later stage, as we shall see, the question of the place of Jewish ceremonial law in the church was to become a matter of debate. But there is no evidence that at the start of the Antioch church the evangelists resorted to the homogeneous unit principle in order to accomplish their task. How was unity preserved when there were many members who did not keep the Jewish ceremonial law and there were others who did? We are not told. We can imagine that difficulties would arise. ‘But,’ as Adolf Schlatter has commented, ‘the early Church never shirked difficulties; it attacked bravely. So nothing more is said about these difficulties, and we do not hear how intercourse in the mixed communities was secured.’<sup>15</sup>

An insight into the degree to which people from a variety of backgrounds worked together in the Antioch church is found in the list of leaders provided by Luke in [Acts 13:1](#). ‘Barnabas, Symeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.’ A more heterogeneous group could hardly be suggested! Barnabas was a Levite, a native of Cyprus ([4:36](#)). Symeon, as his nickname Niger (‘Black’) suggests, was a Jew (or [p. 257](#) proselyte?) apparently of dark complexion, perhaps to be identified with Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus’ cross. Lucius was a Gentile (or a Jew with a Roman name?), a native of the African city of Cyrene, perhaps one of the men who had first preached the gospel in Antioch. Manaen was a ‘foster-brother’ (*synthrophos*) to Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, with whom he had been reared. Saul was an ex-Pharisee, a ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’ and (as a Roman citizen) a member of a small privileged minority in the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>16</sup> What could glue these men together aside from a common experience?

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970), p.114.

<sup>12</sup> McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, p.24.

<sup>13</sup> Floyd Filson, *A New Testament History* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p.191.

<sup>14</sup> Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, p.124.

<sup>15</sup> Adolf Schlatter, *The Church in the New Testament Period*, trans. Paul P. Levertoff (London: SPK, 1961) p.59.

<sup>16</sup> Judge, *Social Patterns*, pp.52, 58.

## THE EARLY GENTILE CHURCHES AND THE 'CIRCUMCISION PARTY'

As long as the church was made up mainly of Jews, apparently it was not a great problem for Jewish Christians to accept Gentile converts as full members of the church without demanding that they become Jews. Peter's report on the way Cornelius and his household had received the Word of God was enough to silence the criticism that the circumcision party in Jerusalem had raised against the apostle ([Acts 11:1-18](#)). Later on, the news concerning the numerical growth of the church in Syrian Antioch was welcomed in the mother church, which then sent one of its most outstanding leaders with the commission to instruct the new believers ([11:22ff.](#)). When the leaders of the Gentile mission (Barnabas and Saul) visited Jerusalem in connection with the relief sent from Antioch for the brethren in Judea ([11:27-30](#)), they had a meeting with James (Jesus' brother), Peter, and John, as a result of which they were given 'the right hand of fellowship'; the understanding was reached that 'we,' says Paul, 'should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised' ([Gal. 2:9](#)). The presence of a young Greek convert, named Titus, with the delegation from Antioch at that time could be taken as a further confirmation that the Jewish Christian would not expect Gentile converts to be circumcised ([Gal. 2:1-3](#)).

The spread of the gospel throughout south Galatia brought about by the travels undertaken by Paul and Barnabas, with the resulting increase of Gentile converts, finally raised the whole issue of the basis on which the Gentiles could participate as full members in the People of God. Was faith to be regarded as sufficient, as the missionaries were preaching? Granted that the gospel was meant to be preached to all men and women, whether Jews or Gentiles, should not the Gentile converts be circumcised? Should they not be required to conform to Jewish ceremonial laws and food regulations? Should they not be expected to 'take upon themselves the yoke of the commandments,' [p. 258](#) like the proselytes to Judaism? The issue was pressed by a circumcision party within the Jerusalem church, made up of people who had previously been associated with the Pharisees ([Acts 15:1, 5](#)).

It is likely that the episode that Paul narrates in [Galatians 2:11-14](#) should be viewed in connection with the visit that according to [Acts 15:1](#) these members of the circumcision party made to Antioch. Before their coming Peter had felt free to share a common table with Gentile Christians, for he had learned in Joppa not to call anything 'common' (or 'unclean') if God had purified it. When they came, however, 'he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party' ([Gal. 2:12](#)). His attitude can best be understood when it is viewed in the light of a historical context in which those Jews who sat at a table where food would not be kosher thereby opened themselves to the accusation of 'traitorously joining a strange people.' According to Paul, those who induced Peter to act inconsistently with his Gentile brethren had been sent by James. Paul's words need not mean that they had been personally commissioned by James to spy out the Jewish-Gentile relations, but from all we know the conservative party may have forced James to take action against a practice that went against their own taboos.

Peter's action, however justified it may have been in his own opinion, was strongly opposed by Paul, who saw in it a 'play-acting' (*hypokrisis*) that compromised the truth of the gospel ([v.13](#)). To be sure, Peter had not agreed with the conservative party on the question of keeping the law as a Christian requirement. His failure had been to give up table fellowship with his Gentile brethren, not because of his own convictions but because of a fierce pragmatism in the face of the danger of being regarded as a traitor to his own race. Although he himself believed with Paul that 'neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' ([6:15](#)), prompted by fear of others he had adopted a course of action that was totally inconsistent with that conviction. And

because of his influence, he had carried with him the rest of the Jewish Christians, including Barnabas (2:13), thereby destroying Christian fellowship and denying the truth of the gospel, according to which for those who have been incorporated into Jesus Christ all the barriers that separate people have been abolished (3:28).

Peter's action showed how real was the danger facing the apostolic church to be divided into two 'denominations'—a Jewish Christian church and a Gentile Christian church, each with its own emphases, serving its own homogeneous unit. The situation was so serious that a meeting was held in Jerusalem in order to discuss the problem, with p. 259 the apostles and elders of the local church and with Paul and Barnabas as delegates from Antioch (Acts 15:ff.). The circumcision party that had provoked the Jewish-Gentile incident in Antioch presented its case, but the 'council' vindicated Paul and Barnabas and sent them back to Antioch with a letter summarizing the decision that had been reached (vv. 2-29).

The 'Jerusalem Decree' provided the basis for Jewish and Gentile Christians to live in unity, as equal members of the body of Christ. It clearly exemplifies the apostolic practice in the face of problems arising out of racial, cultural, or social differences among Christians. In the first place, the Gentile converts would not have to be circumcised in order to be accepted as full members of the People of God. Faith in Jesus Christ was thus affirmed as the only condition for salvation. And the repudiation of the attempt made by the conservative party of the Jerusalem church to impose circumcision on Gentile Christians was archetypical of the Christian rejection of every form of 'assimilationist racism' (to use Wagner's expression). Clearly the apostles would have agreed with the claim that 'any teaching to the effect that Christianity requires a person to adapt to the culture of another homogeneous unit in order to become an authentic Christian is unethical because it is dehumanizing.'<sup>17</sup>

In the second place, it was taken for granted that Jewish and Gentile Christians would continue to have regular social intercourse as members of interracial local congregations and provision was therefore made to prevent conflicts arising out of cultural differences. There is nothing at all in the book of Acts or the epistles to lend support to the theory that the apostles ever contemplated the idea of adopting Peter's approach as described in Galatians 2:11-14: the separation of Jews and Gentiles in different one-race churches that would then endeavour to show their unity in Christ exclusively in 'the supracongregational relationship of believers in the total Christian body over which Christ himself is the head ...'<sup>18</sup> *The apostles rejected imperialistic uniformity but they also rejected segregated uniformity.* It was precisely because they assumed that Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, would normally eat and worship *together* that they took measures to remove the most obvious obstacle to Christian fellowship in interracial churches.

The decision reached was that the Gentiles would abstain from practices that were particularly offensive to Jews, namely (according to the p. 260 most probable reading), from the flesh of animals that had been offered in sacrifices to idols, from meat with blood (including therefore the flesh of animals that had been strangled), and from 'unchastity' in the sense of the degrees of consanguinity and affinity contemplated in Leviticus 18:6-18.<sup>19</sup> If the Jerusalem 'Council', having set out to deal with the question of circumcision, ended with regulations related to table fellowship, the obvious explanation is that, once

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<sup>17</sup> Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, p.99.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.287.

the matter of principle was settled, the effort was made to provide a *modus vivendi* for churches in which Jews and Gentiles would continue to have table fellowship together. And it is quite likely that the regulations included in this arrangement were basically the same as those that had always provided a basis for intercourse between Jews and ‘God-fearing’ Gentiles in the synagogues throughout the empire.<sup>20</sup>

The working arrangement represented by the Jerusalem Decree was entirely consistent with Paul’s attitude expressed later in [1 Corinthians 8:7ff.](#) and [Romans 14:13ff.](#) There was no compromise on a matter of principle, but the Gentiles were asked to forego their freedom with regard to practices that caused offense to their Jewish brethren. At least for Paul the way to solve the conflicts in the church was neither imperialistic uniformity nor segregated uniformity but love, for love alone ‘binds everything together in perfect harmony’ ([Col. 3:14](#)).

## THE GENTILE MISSION

A well-attested fact regarding evangelism in the early church is that almost everywhere the gospel was first preached to both Jews and Gentiles *together*, in the synagogues. Luke provides no evidence to support McGavran’s claim that family connections played a very important role in the extension of the faith throughout the Roman Empire,<sup>21</sup> but there is no doubt that the ‘God-fearers’ on the fringe of the Jewish congregation served in every major city as the bridgehead into the Gentile world.<sup>22</sup> That these Gentiles who had been attracted [P. 261](#) to Judaism should be open to the Christian message is not surprising. If (according to the Mishnah) even the proselytes could only refer to God as ‘O God of *your* Fathers,’ how much less would the ‘Godfearers’—who were not willing to be circumcised and to comply with food laws—be regarded as qualified for membership in the chosen people.

It would be ridiculous to suggest that Jews and Gentiles heard the gospel *together* in the synagogues, but then those who believed were instructed to separate into segregated house churches for the sake of the expansion of the gospel. Such a procedure would have been an open denial of apostolic teaching concerning the unity of the church. It would have also meant that the door of the church was made narrower than the door of the synagogue, where Jews and Gentiles could worship together. The suggestion is so farfetched that it can hardly be taken seriously. All the New Testament evidence, however, points in the opposite direction, namely, in the direction of an apostolic practice whose aim was the formation of churches that would live out the unity of the new humanity in Jesus Christ. The apostles knew very well that if the acceptance of ‘people as they are’ was to be more than lip-service acceptance it had to take place at the level of the local congregations. Accordingly, they sought to build communities in which right from the start Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, poor and rich would worship together and learn the meaning of their unity in Christ, although they often had to deal with difficulties

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<sup>20</sup> W. M. Ramsey, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), p.169. C. Peter Wagner recognizes that ‘Most synagogue communities in the Roman provinces were made up of a core of Hellenistic Jewish residents, some Gentile proselytes who had converted to Judaism and been circumcised, and a number of so-called God-fearers who were Gentiles attracted to the Jewish faith, but who had not wished to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law’ ... (*Our Kind of People*, p. 127). If that kind of pluralism was possible in a Jewish context, Wagner’s thesis that ‘New Testament churches were homogeneous-unit churches’ (p.117) can be discarded *a priori* as an unwarranted assumption.

<sup>21</sup> McGavran, *The Bridges of God* pp.27ff.

<sup>22</sup> Ramsey, *St. Paul* pp.276–77.

arising out of the differences in backgrounds or social status among the converts. That this was the case is well substantiated by a survey of the dealings of the apostles with the churches in the Gentile world, as reflected in the New Testament. For the sake of brevity two examples will suffice.

### **The Church in Corinth**

It is in the context of a chapter dealing with the diversity not of homogeneous unit *churches* but of the *members* of the church that Paul states: 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit' ([1 Cor. 12:12-13](#)). The emphasis on the nature of the oneness of Christians representing various racial and social groups can be best explained when it is viewed in relation to the situation of the church in Corinth.

According to Luke's report in Acts, the initiation of the church in that city followed the pattern characteristic of the Gentile mission. Paul began his preaching ministry in the synagogue, where Jews and Gentiles [p. 262](#) heard the gospel *together* ([Acts 18:4](#)). Later on he was compelled to leave the synagogue, but by then there was a nucleus of converts, including 'God-fearing' Gentiles like Gaius Titius Justus ([Acts 18:7](#); [1 Cor. 1:14](#)) and Stephanas and his household ([1 Cor. 1:16](#); according to [16:15](#), 'the first converts in Achaia'), and Jews like Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his household ([Acts 18:8](#); [1 Cor. 1:14](#)). Gaius' house was located next door to the synagogue ([Acts 18:7](#)) and it became the living quarters for Paul and the meeting place for 'the whole church' consisting of Jews such as Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, and Gentiles such as Erastus and Quartus ([Rom. 16:21, 23](#)).

There are other hints regarding the constituency of the Corinthian church given in 1 Corinthians. The clear inference from [1:26](#) is that the majority of the members came from the lower strata of society—they were not wise, or powerful, or of noble birth 'according to worldly standards'. At least some of the members were slaves, while others were free ([7:21-22](#)). On the other hand, the community also included a few well-to-do members, notably Gaius (presumably a Roman citizen), Crispus (the ex-ruler of the synagogue), Erastus (the city treasurer, [Rom. 16:23](#)) and possibly Chloe (as suggested by the reference to her 'dependents', who may have been slaves, [1 Cor. 1:11](#)).

It would be absurd to take Paul's exhortation to each Corinthian Christian to remain 'in the state in which he was called' ([1 Cor. 7:20](#)) as lending support to the idea that each one was to belong to a homogeneous unit church representing his or her own race or social class.<sup>23</sup> The whole point of the passage ([1 Cor. 7:17-24](#)) is that in the face of God's call, both race and social status have become irrelevant; the only thing that really matters is faithfulness to Jesus Christ. The apostle is teaching here neither that slaves should remain in slavery nor that they should take freedom, should the opportunity for manumission come, but that the Christian's existence is no longer determined by one's legal status, but by the fact that he or she has been called by God. The slave's slavery is irrelevant because the slave is 'a freedman of the Lord', the free man's freedom is equally irrelevant because he is 'a slave of Christ' (v. [22](#)). This is not a piece of advice to reject or to accept manumission—to leave or to remain in one's homogeneous unit—but an exhortation to see that, whatever one's social status may be, he or she is to 'remain with God' (v. [24](#)). In Bartchy's words, 'Since God had called the Corinthians into *koinonia* with his crucified Son, it was *this* fellowship and not any status in the world which determined

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Wagner, *Our Kind of People* p.133.



their p. 263 relationship to God.’<sup>24</sup> This relationship to God was in turn to be the basis for the relationship among Christians.

The racial, social and cultural diversity among the people that made up the church in Corinth goes a long way to explain the problems of dissension that Paul addresses in [1:10ff](#). Although the Christians continued to meet together at Gaius’ house ([Rom. 16:23](#)), they tended to divide into at least four groups, each claiming to follow a different leader ([1:12](#)). We cannot be certain regarding the distinctive claims made by each group, but the least we can say is that the Petrine party was made up of Jews who insisted on the food regulations formulated by the Jerusalem Council (cf. [1 Cor. 8:1ff](#); [10:25ff](#)), while the ‘Christ party’ was probably made up of Gentiles who regarded themselves as ‘spiritual men,’ opposed Jewish legalism, and denied the Jewish doctrine of the resurrection.<sup>25</sup> To complicate things even further, the communal meals, in the course of which the believers participated in the Lord’s Supper, had become a sad picture of the division of the church according to economic position. C. K. Barrett is probably right in inferring from the text that ‘the members of the church were expected to share their resources, the rich, presumably, to bring more than they needed and to make provision for the poor.’<sup>26</sup> Instead of sharing, however, the rich would go ahead and eat their own supper and even get drunk, while the poor would go hungry. The natural result was that the poor felt ashamed and the supper became a display of unbrotherliness ([1 Cor. 11:20–22](#)). It seems clear that, despite the divisions, the whole Christian community in Corinth continued to come together regularly in one assembly ([11:17, 20](#); [14:23, 26](#); cf. [Rom. 16:23](#)). There may be some exaggeration in Johannes Munck’s description of the Corinthian church as ‘The Church Without Factions,’<sup>27</sup> but it is undeniable that all the evidence points in the direction of disunity and bickering, but not of separate churches representing the various positions in conflict.

### The Church in Rome

This church, in contrast with the one in Corinth, seems to have broken up into separate groups, some of which may have been made up of people representing diverse homogeneous units in society. In Bruce’s p. 264 words, ‘Perhaps some local groups consisted of Jewish Christians and others of Gentile Christians, and there were few, if any, in which Jewish and Gentile Christians met together.’<sup>28</sup> It may well be that it was because of this situation that Paul addressed his epistle to the Romans ‘to all God’s beloved in Rome’ ([1:7](#)) rather than ‘to the Church of God which is at Rome.’ A better sign of this situation, however, is the mention made in chapter [16](#) of at least five house churches, associated with the names of Prisca and Aquila (v. [3](#)), Aristobulus (v. [10](#)), Narcissus (v. [11](#)), Asyncritus (v. [14](#)) and Philologus (v. [15](#)).

If this reconstruction of the situation of the church in Rome is correct, are we then to conclude that it lends support to the theory that the apostolic practice was aimed at the

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<sup>24</sup> S. Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery and I. Corinthians 7:21* (Missoula, Mont: Univ. of Montana Press, 1973), p.182.

<sup>25</sup> T. W. Manson, in *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, pp.190ff.

<sup>26</sup> Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1971), p.263.

<sup>27</sup> Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM Press, 1959; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), pp.135ff.

<sup>28</sup> Bruce, *New Testament History*, p.394.

formation of homogeneous unit churches? So to conclude would be to disregard completely what was undoubtedly Paul's main purpose in writing the epistle, namely 'to bring about the obedience of faith' (1:5) in congregations where, as Paul S. Minear has argued,<sup>29</sup> Christians representing a given position would not worship side by side with Christians representing another position. Only by a partial reading of Minear's work can the evidence adduced by him be used as lending support to the theory that the apostolic church consisted largely of homogeneous unit congregations or that the situation of the church in Rome reflected the apostolic practice.<sup>30</sup> Quite to the contrary, Minear's claim is that the epistle to the Romans was written with the hope that 'a larger number of segregated house-churches would at last be able to worship together—Jews praising God among Gentiles and Gentiles praising God with his people.'<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, he shows how the entire epistle develops the idea that through the coming of Jesus Christ all human distinctions have been broken down, and concludes that faith required that the various groups in Rome should welcome one another notwithstanding their opposing views on foods and days. Thus, for Minear the situation viewed by Paul in chapters 14 and 15 was 'the target of the whole epistle.'<sup>32</sup>

Paul's approach to the problem in Rome was consistent with the apostolic practice with regard to churches threatened by division. There is no evidence that he would have approved of the modern device to solve the problem of disunity, that is, the forming of segregated congregations open to communications with other segregated congregations. All his letters make it overwhelmingly clear that he conceived oneness in Christ as an essential aspect of the gospel and therefore made every effort to see that Christians would together 'with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:5). p. 265

Other New Testament writings reflect the same apostolic concern for church unity across all the barriers separating people in society. And no research is necessary to verify that the congregations that resulted from the Gentile mission normally included Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, rich and poor, and were taught that in Christ all the differences derived from their respective homogeneous units had become irrelevant (cf. Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; Philem. v. 16; Jas. 1:9-11, 2:1-7, 4:13; 1 Pet. 2:18; 1 Jn. 3:17).

The impact that the early church made on non-Christians *because of Christian brotherhood across natural barriers* can hardly be overestimated. The abolition of the old separation between Jew and Gentile was undoubtedly one of the most amazing accomplishments of the gospel in the first century. Equally amazing, however, was the breaking down of the class distinction between master and slave. As Michael Green comments, 'When the Christian missionaries not only proclaimed that in Christ the distinctions between slave and free man were done away as surely as those between Jew and Greek, but actually lived in accordance with their principles, then this had an enormous appeal.'<sup>33</sup> In F. F. Bruce's words, 'Perhaps this was the way in which the gospel made the deepest impression on the pagan world.'

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<sup>29</sup> Paul S. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purpose of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1971).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, pp.130-31.

<sup>31</sup> Minear, *The Obedience of Faith*, pp.16-17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33

<sup>33</sup> Green, *Evangelism*, pp. 117-18.

### III AN EVALUATION OF THE 'HOMOGENEOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE'

How are we to evaluate the use of the homogeneous unit principle?

Before attempting to answer that question, two observations are necessary for the sake of clarity. In the first place, it cannot be denied that from a biblical perspective the (quantitative) growth of the church is a legitimate concern in the Christian mission.<sup>35</sup> If God 'desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' ([1 Tim. 2:4](#)), no Christian is in harmony with God's desire unless he or she also longs to see all coming to Jesus Christ. Moreover, it is clear that this longing will have to be expressed in practical terms (which may well [p.266](#) include the use of anthropological and sociological insights) so that the gospel is in fact proclaimed as widely as possible. The issue in this evaluation, therefore, is not the employment of principles that can help in the expansion of the church. In the second place, it is a fact that hardly needs verification that the growth of the church takes place in specific social and cultural contexts and that people generally *prefer* to become Christians without having to cross the barriers between one context and another. This, again is not the issue in this evaluation.

The real issue is whether church planting should be carried out so as to enable people to become Christians without crossing barriers,<sup>36</sup> whether this principle is 'essential for the spread of the Gospel' and biblically and theologically defensible.

Let me draw the following conclusions:

1. In the early church the gospel was proclaimed to all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free, rich or poor, without partiality. More often than not during the Gentile mission *Jews and Gentiles heard the gospel together*.

2. The breaking down of the barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as *an essential aspect of the gospel*, not merely as a result of it. Evangelism would therefore involve a call to be incorporated into a new humanity that included all kinds of people. Conversion was never a merely religious experience, it was also a way of becoming a member of a community where people would find their identity in Christ rather than in their race, social status or sex.

3. The church not only grew, but *it grew across cultural barriers*. The New Testament contains no example of a local church whose membership had been taken by the apostles from a single homogeneous unit, unless that expression is used to mean no more than a group of people with a common language. By contrast, it provides plenty of examples of how the barriers had been abolished in the new humanity.

4. Each church was meant to portray *the oneness of its members* regardless of their racial, cultural, or social differences, and in order to reach that aim the apostles suggested practical measures. If 'authentic unity is *always* unity in diversity',<sup>37</sup> the unity fostered by the apostles could never be one that eliminated plurality in the membership of local churches. Unity was not to be confused with uniformity either among local congregations or among individual church members. In Ignatius' words, 'Where Jesus Christ is, there is the whole Church.' [p.267](#) Each local congregation was therefore to manifest both the unity and the diversity of the body of Christ.

5. There may have been times when the believers were accused of traitorously abandoning their own culture in order to join another culture, but there is no indication

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<sup>35</sup> Orlando E. Costas, 'Church Growth as a Multidimensional Phenomenon: Some Lessons from Chile', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5, no. 1 January 1981): 2ff.

<sup>36</sup> McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, pp.198ff.

<sup>37</sup> Wagner, *Our Kind of People*, p.96; italics added.

that the apostles approved of adjustments made in order to avoid that charge. They regarded Christian community across cultural barriers, not as an optional blessing to be enjoyed whenever circumstances were favourable to it or as an addendum that could be left out if deemed necessary to make the gospel more palatable, but as *essential to Christian commitment*. They would have readily included any attempt to compromise the unity of the church among those adjustments to which Christianity objects as 'adjustments which violate essential Christian teachings.'<sup>38</sup>

The analysis above leads us to conclude that the 'Church Growth' emphasis on homogeneous unit churches is in fact directly opposed to the apostolic teaching and practice in relation to the expansion of the church. No missionary methodology can be built without a solid biblical theology of mission as a basis. What can be expected of a missiology that exhibits dozens of books and dissertations dealing with the 'Church Growth' approach, but not one major work on the theology of mission?

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Dr. C. René Padilla, is Associate Editor of Editorial Caribe, Latin America Mission Publications, Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is also editor of Mision, a new bimonthly Latin American missiological magazine. [p. 268](#)

## The Priority of Ethnicity

Donald McGavran

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A million Asians live in Great Britain. They are typical of many minorities in other lands. A brief look at the opportunities and problems of their evangelization will illuminate some important principles. We cannot consider the million Asians as a single block. They include dozens of different kinds of Asians: linguistic groups, Hindus, Moslems, Sikhs, secularists, and materialists. Some are educated, some are not. Sri Lankans, Pakistanis, Indians, Singaporeans, Ugandans, Kenyans, South Africans, Trinidadians and so on form tight communities. They regard other groups of Asians with almost as much distance as they do white Britishers. If they are invited to join either white or Asian congregations, their response will be minimal.

If 'Come unto me all you who labour' is to be obeyed, it must be heard as an invitation to remain yourself linguistically and ethnically while following the Lord Jesus. In the New Testament church the greatest growth took place when Jews joined Jewish congregations, Samaritans joined Samaritan congregations, and Cornelius's congregations continued to meet in his distinctly Italian patio. The Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and his household where Peter and his companions were the only Jews among perhaps 50 Italians.

### NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES WERE MONOETHNIC

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<sup>38</sup> McGavran, *The Clash between Christianity and Culture*, p.20

The first six chapters of Acts record amazing, explosive growth: three thousand, daily additions, five thousand men, multitudes of both men and women, the number of disciples grew large, etc. (2:41; 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1; 6:7). Luke tells us clearly, 'They spake the word to none but Jews'. Since it took special revelation from God to allow the apostle to baptize Cornelius's whole household and friends, and to lay hands on the believers in Samaria so that they could receive the Holy Spirit, we may be sure that the early multitudes were very largely Jews. For some years Jewish congregations were all they could join; there were no others.

I do not argue that this notable beginning into a one-race church is biblical validation for the fact that much church growth does still take p. 269 place that way. I do plead, however, that it be recognized as a way in which God did bless and has blessed amazingly. The church had to grow strong within one people before it could break over into other peoples, other ethnic and linguistic groups.

The New Testament does not say that Jews joining Jewish congregations was the cause of church growth. Neither do I. The cause was God's grace. The cause was miracles God worked at the hands of the apostles. The cause was the resurrection and the amazing prophesy of the Old Testament that these things would be.

While Christ does certainly call to unity, and we affirm that in Christ there is no Jew, no Greek, we must also affirm ethnicity with equal vigor. The New Testament congregations were strikingly monoethnic. Indeed, the Jewish churches described in the first few chapters of Acts were not only one hundred percent Jewish, they were also strikingly congregations of common people. Very few Pharisees, Sadducees, rulers of the people, or scribes joined the congregations. The record is clear that while the Levites stayed out of the church for a few months, or years, there came a time when they flooded in.

The Levite movement to Christ is a remarkable confirmation of what I am describing as a normal Christian process. No one could be a priest unless he had impeccable Levitical ancestry on both sides of his family for many, many generations. The Levites were as tight a caste as any caste in India. They stayed out of the church till a great many of them could come in, and thus they could continue to marry their sons to Levite girls.

We need to be careful here. The New Testament does not say that after they came in they continued to marry within the caste. It does not say that they stayed out till enough of them were of a mind to become disciples of the Lord, so that they could maintain, within the church, a semi-separate existence. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable that where a great many of the Jews for whom they performed the temple and other rituals had become Christians and were continuing their temple worship, there the way opened for the priests as a class to become Christian.

Paul did not win 'Gentiles in general'. He won Gentiles connected with, related to, friends with, the Gentile proselytes already in the synagogues. The apostles to the Gentiles always went first of all, in every new town, to the synagogue of the Jews. It was there and there only that he would meet the receptive segments of Gentile society, the Gentiles who had become Jews and had multitudes of relatives who liked the high monotheism of the Hebrew faith; but they did not like circumcision and some of the dietary restrictions. p. 270

## **ETHNICITY THEN BROTHERHOOD**

Because the battle for brotherhood is raging so strongly, and Christians are making such heroic efforts to overcome ethnic pride, therefore any recognition of ethnicity meets with considerable and sometimes fierce opposition. 'Any stress on ethnicity,' such Christians



shout 'is segregation and racial pride. Down with it.' These shouts are understandable but mistaken. Down with racism: Yes; down with ethnic pride and exclusiveness: Yes; down with the oppression of subject peoples: Yes, All Christians agree. There is no argument here.

One-people congregations as a rule do tend to feel themselves a separate people and hence easily fall into the sins of ethnic pride and exclusiveness. However, since the only church most people will join is a church of their own kind of people, where they feel at home, where other people talk their language, where the food at church suppers has the right amount of garlic in it, therefore world evangelization and all missionary effort must do two things: first, win people into churches where they feel at home; and second, work in those churches, with plenty of biblical instruction, to promote brotherhood, humility, and welcome for the whole human race.

When people become Christians they do join the one body. They are one in Christ. There can be no argument on this point. But at the same time, linguistic, educational, age, ethnic, and occupational differences do not vanish. Movements to Christ take place along linguistic, class, and ethnic lines. People do not decide first, 'We shall act in a one-hundred percent brotherly fashion,' and then become Christ's followers. Rather, they become Christ's followers and then filled with the Holy Spirit, and commanded by the Scriptures, work their way toward brotherhood—usually much more slowly than we like.

Christianity must hold two truths in equal tension. We must not espouse only one of them. Unity must be the goal; so must ethnicity. Christ did not come to destroy *panta ta ethne*, but to disciple them. Revelation tells us that before the throne will be people from all ethnic units and languages of planet earth with their languages and ethnic distinctions intact.

I spent more than 20 years of my missionary life battling for the rights of the oppressed and disinherited castes. If Christianity is to flow in India and other parts of the world, we must be true to the New Testament pattern of adjustment to the existing social order, while maintaining the fully Christian ideal. We must not overstate the case. We must not insist on full brotherhood at once, achieved in the act of baptism. [p. 271](#)

In the New Testament church, the practice of slavery continued, and women's subordinate position continued. Paul returned a runaway slave, Onesimus, to his master. The runaway slave was a free man in Rome. When he was returned to his master, he was put back into slavery. Paul commands slaves to obey their masters and not to use the fact that in Christ they are equal to justify disobedience. While sticking strictly to the ideal that in Christ we are all brothers, and in Christ there is no slave, no freeman, no Jew, no Gentile, at the same time the apostle Paul made substantial adjustments to the present evil world.

Had the revelation of God commanded slaves to act like freemen, the Christian religion would not have spread like wildfire in the Roman world. Had the Scriptures carried to its logical conclusion the dictum 'no male, no female,' the New Testament church would have had women elders and women apostles. Instead, while maintaining the ideal (the long-range goal), Scripture commands an adjustment sufficient to allow the Christian faith to spread, and Christian churches to multiply in those particular societies. If that happens, ultimately slavery will go and women will be treated as full equals. That is the New Testament pattern.

If we want brotherhood, the surest way to get it is to win hundreds of thousands of men and women from every segment of society as dedicated, Bible-obeying Christians. The Holy Spirit in the heart will impel Christians toward full brotherhood. The New Testament pattern is to insist that Christians put into operation as much of the ideal as possible. They must act in such a way that their unbelieving relatives and friends can hear

Christ's call. But at the same time they must constantly press toward greater and greater practice of love, compassion, brotherhood, equality and mercy.

The Epistle of James illustrates this. In some congregations the wealthy and educated were seated in the good places, and the poor were permitted to stand in the rear. James strongly objects to this. That is exactly the tension in all lands at all times. If you bring in the dirty, unwashed, smelly slaves and seat them with great respect among the well-dressed, bathed, and sweet smelling ladies and gentlemen who attend the church, what will happen? The cultured people will cease coming. Seating the unwashed Christians that way will slam shut the door to the unconverted washed. There is the problem.

The New Testament congregations clearly exhibited the tension. The scriptures say clearly, 'Be brotherly.' They also say clearly, 'Disciple all segments of the human race.' If being 100 percent brotherly keeps a large segment of the population from even hearing [p. 272](#) the gospel, we must find a way round. We must make some adjustment. We must not, of course, practice segregation and let Christianity reinforce racial pride. But equally important, we must keep the door open to men and women where they now are.

For example, if our congregation is made up very largely of coal miners, we must not in the name of brotherhood insist on university professors becoming Christians in that congregation. There must be congregations of factory laborers and other congregations of business executives. In all of them, of course, Christians filled with the Holy Spirit will accept all Christians as equally our brothers and equally entitled to worship in any Christian church. The church for all men and women ought to be a place to feel at home. Since people feel at home among their own kind, the actual outcome of effective evangelism among all segments of the population will be congregations that fit all of these segments. All segments will preach and practice brotherhood.

## **CONVERSION THEN DISCIPLESHIP**

Whether it is coal miners in West Virginia, or university professors in Chicago, or Sikh immigrants in Vancouver, or Maasai tribesmen in Kenya, or Kamma castemen in Andhra State, India, we must do two things: (1) win them to Christ; (2) get them to practice as much of Christ's teachings as possible in the occupation, race, language, economic bracket they were in when Christ called them. We must not place (2) before (1). If we try to do that, we shall find ourselves with very few Christians, and the cause of oneness, justice, and brotherhood will be irreparably damaged. Before we can lead men and women to practice Christian virtues, they must become members of the household of God, followers of Christ, obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The church lives in the real world of many classes and strata of society: young, old, educated, uneducated, rich, poor, Asian, European, high caste, low caste. In that real world it seeks to enroll as thoroughly convinced, believing, obedient followers of Christ as many in each segment of society as possible. The church constantly teaches full purity, full honesty, full compassion, full sharing of one's possessions. But the church (starting with those early churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Greece, and Asia Minor) also continually adjusts to the surrounding world so that the door of salvation may remain open to the rest of each segment of society.

The young in most congregations illustrate this pattern. They are generally treated as a separate class, encouraged to study the Bible as [p. 273](#) young people, play young people's games, sit together, and so on. Despite the fact that in Christ there are no young, no old, they are not forced to live in congregations as if age differences did not exist.

The Asian mosaic in Britain, numbering a million, if it is to be evangelized effectively, must be approached in view of the ethnic realities. Muslim Pakistanis are not going to join

Syrian churches speaking Malayalam, nor will the Syrian churches invite them to do so. Gujarati merchant caste people in London are not going to join congregations made up of Trinidadian Christians, who are descendants of low caste indentured laborers from South India and who have maintained in their congregations a Trinidadian culture and dominance.

Brotherhood will come. Make no mistake, the Lord God Almighty will bring it. Bible-believing and obeying Christians will institute it. But to give the spirit of love and brotherhood the greatest chance, it must flow through congregations of like cultured people. Bright days and great victories lie ahead, if only we hold steadily in mind Christ's command to disciple whole segments of society, whole ethnoses, whole castes, and tribes, and peoples.

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Donald McGavran is senior Professor of missions at the School of World Mission and Institute of Church Growth, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. He was formerly a missionary to India. [p. 274](#)

## **Two Case Histories of Church Growth 1. A Culturally Sensitive Area An interview with Phil Parshall**

**Jim Reapsome**

*Reprinted from Muslim World Pulse, with permission*

Phil Parshall has ministered in a Muslim country for the past 21 years. His book, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Baker, 1980), drew both praise and criticism. He was praised for suggesting fresh ways to remove Christian cultural barriers standing in the way of reaching Muslims; he was criticized for giving up distinctively Christian positions for the sake of building bridges to Muslims. In this interview with MUSLIM WORLD PULSE he tells of the ongoing struggle to gain acceptance for his views.

*One of the criticisms of your approach is that older Muslim converts don't buy it.*

*Parshall:* Those who feel that way have been influenced by traditional churches. They belong to more ingrown types of churches. They are products of *extraction evangelism*, cut off from their own Muslim family and friends. In many instances, they have integrated into a Western influenced Christian ghetto.

*What about more recent converts who have not had this kind of traditional Western missionary indoctrination?*

*Parshall:* They have no problems with what we are doing. They are coming out of orthodox Islam. In the last two years we have seen 15 heads of families come to the Lord. We have seen a worshipping group established. The believers have put up a building with their own money on their own property. The leader is the headmaster of the village school. We've made things optional with them. It's not legalistic. There is no conflict with them over such things as the fast, washing before praying, and so on, until they run into

traditional Christians. That's why we started in a virgin area where there were no Christians at all.

*What about keeping the fast (Ramadan)?*

*Parshall:* Some missionaries say that in order to be a Christian you must break Ramadan. I'm sorry, but the Bible doesn't say that. I say, let's have a choice in the matter. The Bible talks about fasting. With proper biblical teaching, fasting can be an optional thing. The reason some Muslim converts don't want to keep the fast is because missionaries have told them it's a compromise of their faith. All I am saying is, Show that to me in the Bible. *p. 275*

*Very concisely, what is your approach and how does it differ from the traditional approach?*

*Parshall:* The traditional approach is extraction evangelism. A Muslim goes to the mission compound, he's led along by the missionary or a local Christian, and he comes to a profession of faith. He goes back to his village and seeks to articulate his faith. The people get angry and tell him to get out. Islam is very community orientated. Sometimes it literally is a physical extraction. The missionaries have to send a Land Rover to bring the convert out before he gets killed.

Now I ask, is that necessary? One of our *absolutes is that every Muslim convert must stay in his culture*. Extraction is not an option. The Muslim knows that from the first day he meets us. He must stay within his culture, society and community.

We have proved that it can be done with 100 converts. They have all remained in their communities, by being very careful, by being discreet, and by keeping a style of Christian worship that is attractive to Muslims.

What they see in our church is not so drastically different from what they are used to. We sit on bamboo mats on the floor. We have Arabic writing on the walls. The Koran holder has a Bible in it. They see me with a beard, wearing the clothes of a religious man in their culture. The profile is more indigenous as to what religion is supposed to look like to them.

In all of our literature we use Islamic art forms on the covers. We do not give any financial assistance to converts. That's because Muslims see this as an inducement to conversion.

*Have all your 100 converts been baptized?*

*Parshall:* No, just the ones who have come to that point. They all know it is down the road. Water baptism is biblical, universal, and historical. The problem is that Muslims see this as the time when you bail out of society, and that's exactly what we don't want them to think. That's why I really struggled with this.

Right now we hold off a bit, until a social unit of six, eight or ten people are ready to be baptized together. In the first instance, when we had no Christians in our area, three leaders went down to the river together early one morning. The follower baptized the leader and the leader turned around and baptized the followers. We're delighted with that. It is now possible for these men to go into other areas and baptize new converts.

*What about their keeping the Sheep Feast and sacrifice?*

*Parshall:* Optional, I'm completely at ease about this. The issues are legalism and merit. We make it clear that these practices must not be *p. 276* kept to earn merit to be accepted by God. Also, Christian meaning should be incorporated into these ceremonies.

*What day do you worship?*

*Parshall:* In our country the government has recently switched weekly holidays from Sundays to Fridays. Most of our churches now worship on Fridays.

*You've also been criticized for retaining the Muslim words, Allah (God) and Isa (Jesus).*

*Parshall:* We use religious terms like Allah and Isa because the usual Christian word, *Ishwar*, is abhorrent to Muslims. It was originally a Hindu word taken over by William

Carey. For Muslims, it conjures up idols. So we go back and use their terms and reinterpret them.

*How do your churches organize?*

*Parshall:* We follow the mosque pattern. It's something like the Christian Brethren style. Each church is autonomous. We don't encourage organizational links between them; we don't want bishops, big power structures, and money. The only 'money' is food. When we go to their place, they give us a meal; when they come to our place, we give them a meal, and that's it.

We have no institutions and no plans for any. For meeting social and physical needs, we look to groups like World Vision, World Relief Commission, Food For the Hungry, Salvation Army, and the Mennonite Central Committee. They come and do their thing in Christ's name. By government regulation, they can't preach. They serve a difference audience than we do.

*What about washing before praying?*

*Parshall:* Every Muslim has always washed before praying. Muslims will not pray without washing. Outside our centers we have a pot of water. If the converts want to wash, we don't object. In Islam, this is a meritorious act, to make one ceremonially clean. We tell the converts that washing does not make them clean before God, but if a convert has washed before praying for 50 years, we don't insist that he suddenly stop just because he has become a Christian.

*Some of your critics have said that your pragmatism overrides your theology.*

*Parshall:* Some scholars feel we should give a theological treatise for each of the things we do. I respect and appreciate theological critiques. On the other hand, I am a pragmatist, and if I look at something from my theological orientation, and it's permissible, then I do it. I don't want to spend the rest of my life going to one Th. D after another trying to figure out whether it's alright to wash before you pray. *p. 277*

## II A Multi-ethnic Community

*Reprinted from Evangelical Missions Quarterly, with permission*

Probably the model having the most potential for exhibiting total respect for maintained homogeneous units in a context of true spiritual unity is the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual local church. The First Baptist Church of Flushing, New York continues to show that it can happen. It is made up of a number of ethnic and linguistic 'congregations' that compose the total church. A pastoral staff from Chinese, Korean, Spanish, and Portuguese backgrounds, among others, ministers to 'their' people in separate services. Prayer and Bible study groups flourish in other languages. Even church dinners reflect the ethnic diversity of the church, located in an area where more than fifty languages are spoken.

According to the senior pastor, Rev. Russell Rosser, the key to the healthy life and outreach of the church is their emphasis on relationships. A priority is placed on love and the preservation of unity. Members from the various 'congregations' share weekly in common worship services where the message is often translated. The pastoral staff meets for four hours a week for in-depth sharing in the Word and prayer, and for ministry to each other. The church board reflects the ethnic diversity of the membership. Each group, however, is free to determine the extent and closeness of its relationship to the



organizational structure of the church. Several are less closely involved than others, largely because of linguistic barriers. The point is that at no point are relationships forced nor artificially produced. The believers share far more than a common building; that fact is by comparison almost incidental to their oneness.

This particular church is a microcosm of what the Body of Christ is all about: unity out of diversity. A failure to take either diversity (and thus homogeneous units) or unity seriously is unbiblical and can hinder the witness and growth of the church. These two givens, societal and biblical, are too often seen as antithetical and one is unnecessarily sacrificed for the other. Rather, the biblical perspective should be maintained with reference to both, and in this way the church will find an experiential alternative that will permit each to find appropriate expression.

### SOME QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. How should the election of Israel be understood in terms of HUP?
2. What place has the family as HUP? [p. 278](#)
3. To which of the following can we apply the *ta ethne* in the Great Commission? Peoples, tribes, nation state, suburbia, industrial complex and political associations.
4. What is needed to make ethnic churches into multi-cultural brotherhoods? [p. 279](#)

## An Editorial Comment

*This year all over the world the Protestant churches have been celebrating the 500th birthday anniversary of the great German reformer Martin Luther. Special thanksgiving services, publications and new editions and evaluations of Luther's writings and theology are numerous by now. Even a new kind of anthology of all Luther's works has been published. Obviously, Germany leads in these celebrations with special releases on every aspect of Luther's life and ministry. ERT's tribute to this man of God takes the form of a recapitulation of his theological emphases relevant to the current theological debates.*

*The following two articles published here in the section on Ethics and Society have been selected according to the above criterion. When the Christian world seems to be falling apart, not on the debates about Christ or church but on the questions about man, history and the World, it is imperative to remind ourselves of the decisive role the doctrine of creation played in the reformer's thinking. The first article brings out this fact. The author puts it strongly when he says that Luther's doctrine of justification by faith can be best understood only through his doctrine of creation! This excellent paper also adds a conclusion: the special relevance of Luther's doctrines for Asia, particularly for Confucianism, Taoism and Hinduism and their cultures. Perhaps even more crucial is the debate between dogmatics and ethics. In our age when ethics is equated with dogmatics, it is all the more necessary to recover the essence of Luther's *zwei-Reiche Lehre*, the two kingdoms doctrine. The second article in this section re-evaluates and demonstrates the significance of this Lutheran teaching for our world and age.*

*It is possible that some readers may be displeased to see Luther omitted in the section on Faith, but being discussed in the area of Ethics. This does not minimize the emphases of the*

*Reformation, but it reemphasizes the essential link between justification by faith and justice in action.*

Sunand Sumithra p. 280

# **The Significance of Luther's Thought on Nature in the Christian Witness in Asia Today**

Choong Chee Pang

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## **THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORD OF CREATION**

Heinrich Bornkamm is right when he observes:

In the sixteenth century and its peripheries two genuine revolutions broke through the cover of occidental intellectual life. They were two revolutions. They contributed something new to the history of mankind, and, unlike humanism, they signified more than a return home to ancient wisdom and to the measured and adjusted humanity of bygone ages. The one is the revolution of Christian faith through Luther; the other is a revolution consisting in a new conception of natural science, introduced by Nicholas of Cusa and extending through Paracelsus and Copernicus to Bruno, Kepler, and Galileo.<sup>1</sup>

Luther was basically a man of his time, In his own profound mind the two revolutions could not be entirely divorced from one another. There is undoubtedly in Luther's religious faith and spiritual experience a picture of nature or the created world. This is based on his conviction that it is faith in God the Creator that determines man's understanding of himself, of his existence and salvation. For this reason, Luther can characterize faith in God the Creator as the ultimately decisive truth. In a sermon of 1523 he says:

'I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Creator of heaven and of earth' is, without a doubt, the highest expression of our faith. Whoever genuinely believes this has already been helped, has once again been set right, and arrived at the place from which Adam fell ... For such a man must have died to all things, to good and to evil, to death and to life, to hell and to heaven, and confess from his heart that he is able to do nothing by his own power.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Bornkamm. *Luther's World of Thought*. Eng. tr. by Martin H. Bertram (Saint Louis, Missouri, 1965) p.176.

<sup>2</sup> WA 24, 18.

Although Luther's picture of nature was largely informed and shaped by the biblical revelation it also reflects his keen personal observation of nature. It was his strong faculty of observation which enabled him to derive a profusion of metaphors from the realm of nature. For Luther 'All creation is the most beautiful book or Bible; in it p. 281 God has described and portrayed Himself.'<sup>3</sup> May we take this as a very profound Lutheran statement on 'Natural Theology'? If so, there is obviously quite a lot of 'Natural Theology' in Luther's thought.

Reaffirming and elaborating Paul's assertion in [Romans 1:20](#) that God has always been known through His works of creation the Reformer comments:

The veneration of various gods in the idolatrous pagan religions presupposes that men carry within themselves a conceptual notion of God and of the divine being. Without that, it would have been impossible for them to call their idols 'gods', to ascribe divine attributes to them, to worship them, and to pray to them. Men have this idea of God, however, as Paul says, from God himself.<sup>4</sup>

This knowledge covers not only the metaphysical attributes of God but also His moral attributes including the awareness that God is good, gracious, merciful, and generous. However, Luther is also keenly aware of the limits to this knowledge of God: It does not give man certainty concerning his relationship with God, i.e. although man has the idea of God, he has no real experience of Him as his Creator and Saviour. Thus, Luther distinguishes between the general (*generalis*) and the proper (*propria*) knowledge of God. The latter, according to Luther, can only come from the Word of God. In spite of its limitations, it is often in and through the various phenomena of nature that the presence of God is most vividly and intimately felt by Luther. For him, it is often in the ordinary course of nature that the miraculous works of God are clearly perceived rather than in 'extraordinary' events. Thus, the common things in nature are beautiful and precious. The tragic thing is that man has almost lost sight of this, 'We possess such beautiful creatures; but we pay little attention to them, because they are so common,' laments Luther.<sup>5</sup> Being a sensitive observer of nature Luther is able to use even the imagery of sunlight to help explain and justify his belief in the miracle of Christ's presence in the Eucharist.

Luther's use of imageries drawn from nature was simply inexhaustible. This is not only due to his freedom of poetic imagination but also because he is convinced that nature is a clear sign of the hidden wisdom and power of God. As such, nature, in Luther's view, is not to be explored and exploited for its own sake. Rather, it should be regarded as a faithful witness to God. p. 282

Luther's view of nature is a dynamic one. He perceives that there is still 'much secret activity in nature.'<sup>6</sup>

For Luther, creativity belongs to the very nature of God. God is God because He and only He creates.<sup>7</sup> Not only does God create; He also preserves everything:

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<sup>3</sup> WA 48, 201, 5.

<sup>4</sup> WA 56, 179; LW 26, 399.

<sup>5</sup> *Table Talk*, 3, 3390.

<sup>6</sup> *Kirchenpostille* (1522): 10, 11; 560, 9 quoted in Bornkamm, p.181.

<sup>7</sup> See Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, Eng. tr. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia, 1975), p.105.

He has not created the world as though he were a carpenter: building a house that he could walk away from when finished and let stand the way it is. On the contrary, he remains with and preserves everything he made. Otherwise, it would neither hold up nor endure.<sup>8</sup>

Luther regards the constant preservation of creation by God at every point of space and time as an on-going act of new creation:

Daily we can see the birth into this world of new human beings, young children who were non-existent before; we behold new trees, new animals on the earth, new fish in the water, new birds in the air. And such creation and preservation will continue until the Last Day.<sup>9</sup>

Being fully convinced that God is actively present, working and creating in all reality, Luther is able to describe forcefully the divine presence in the Eucharist:

It is God who creates, effects, and preserves all things through his almighty power and right hand, as our Creed confesses ... If he is to create or preserve it, however, he must be present and must make and preserve his creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects. Therefore, indeed, he himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.<sup>10</sup>

Although the divine power is actively present in all things it is not consumed in the reality of the world. God and the world are never identical. God continues to transcend the world as its Creator and Preserver.<sup>11</sup> This point is of vital importance in the Asian Context. For Luther's concept of God is radically different from pantheistic and animistic thinking.

For Luther, God's work of creation can never be separated from His [p. 283](#) Word. It is in fact the Divine Word that has brought the world into being. Ultimately, man must search for God where the Word is:

For although He is everywhere, in all creatures, and although I could find Him in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope (for He surely is there), still He does not want me to look for Him apart from the Word ... Search for Him where the Word is. There you will surely find Him. Otherwise you only tempt God and establish idolatry.<sup>12</sup>

Not only are all things made through the Word, they are also preserved by the same dynamic Word:

In the doctrine of creation it is of primary importance that we know and believe that God has not withdrawn His sustaining hand from His handiwork. Therefore when St. John declares that everything made was made through the Word, one must also realize that all things created are also preserved by His Word. Otherwise they could not continue to exist very long.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> WA 21, 521; 46, 558.

<sup>9</sup> WA 46, 559; LW 22, 27.

<sup>10</sup> WA 23, 133; LW 37, 57.

<sup>11</sup> WA 23, 133; LW 37, 57; WA 26, 337; LW 37, 228.

<sup>12</sup> *Sermon von dem Sakrament* (1526): 19; 492, 19, quoted in Bornkamm, p.191.

<sup>13</sup> LW 22, 29.

Commenting on [Hebrews 1:3](#) Luther says,

This participle, 'upholding' has special emphasis and is a Hebrew idiom ... What we call 'to preserve', the Hebrews state more suitably with 'to uphold', which expresses a certain tender and, so to speak, motherly care for the things which He created and which should be cherished.<sup>14</sup>

Following the theological tradition of the Church, Luther believes that creating means creating 'out of nothing' (*ex nihilo*):

It is his nature to create all things out of nothing. And it is his own most proper nature that he calls those things into being which do not exist.<sup>15</sup>

But for Luther, it is more than a tradition. It is a vision. It is the very basis of man's hope of salvation, i.e., God takes the man who is actually *nothing* before Him, because of sin and death, and makes him a new creation 'out of nothing' (*ex nihilo*). Luther often expresses this profound truth in his typically paradoxical manner:

The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.<sup>16</sup>

You (God) give us life when you permit us to be killed.<sup>17</sup>

It is in the context of these characteristics of God's creativity that Luther's doctrine of justification can best be understood. Luther p. 284 expressly includes justification as part of the paradoxical creative activity of God:

God enjoys bringing light out of darkness and making things out of nothing ... Thus he has created all things and thus he helps those who have been abandoned, he justifies the sinners, he gives life to the dead, and he saves the damned.<sup>18</sup>

Luther's doctrine of justification is thus decisively based on his understanding of creation. The justification of the sinner is perhaps the most exciting and glorious of all the specific examples of the way in which God creates out of nothing.

Luther is neither a dreamer nor a romantic. He is a realist, in the sense that he always looks at things from the perspective of biblical realism. As a biblical realist Luther shares the apostle Paul's agony over the vanity and bondage to which the whole of creation is subject. According to the profound perception of Paul in [Romans 8](#) the vanity and bondage to which nature remains subdued is the sin-laden humanity which nature must serve unwillingly. Luther paints a vivid picture of nature's repeated attempts to shake off this accursed dominion, by means of natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. On this Bornkamm writes:

In Luther's paean on nature we hear an undertone of sadness—a tone different from that of the contemporary Renaissance mysticism or even of Bruno's new pious religion which jubilantly announces the harmony of the cosmos. Luther's viewpoint does not have a mythological tinge, as some might be tempted to judge; no, it finds its being in a conviction,

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<sup>14</sup> LW 29, 112.

<sup>15</sup> WA 40, 154.

<sup>16</sup> WA 56, 375.

<sup>17</sup> WA 31, 171.

<sup>18</sup> WA 40, 154.



flowing forth with poetical force, of the loneliness and the forsakenness of sinful man in the world.<sup>19</sup>

Luther criticizes the philosophers and metaphysicians for failing to see the reality of nature's agony and predicament on account of the sin of humanity:

For the philosophers so direct their gaze at the present state of things that they speculate only about what things are and what quality they have ...<sup>20</sup>

'You will be the best of philosophers and the best explorers of the nature of things', says Luther, 'if you will learn from the apostle to consider the creation as it waits, groans, and travails.'<sup>21</sup> Luther does not, however, entertain the gnostic idea and speculation about a possible fall of the entire creation. Creation has undoubtedly been subject to abuse, exploitation and disturbance ever since the fall of man. But it is not contaminated by sin. It is still good: 'The nature of animals has remained as it was created.'<sup>22</sup>

Commenting on [Romans 1:20](#) Luther says:

For all the things that God made were 'very good' ([Gen. 1:31](#)) and are still good, as the apostle says in [1 Tim. 4:4](#): 'Everything created by God is good', and in [Titus 1:15](#): 'To the pure all things are pure.' Therefore the creation becomes vain, evil, and harmful from outside itself, and not by its own fault ...<sup>23</sup>

In [Romans 8:18–25](#) the Apostle Paul is concerned with both the salvation of mankind and the liberation of the whole of creation from bondage and decay:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the Sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. ([Romans 8:19–21](#)).

In his profound insight and vision the Apostle sees clearly the vital solidarity between mankind and the whole of creation. If creation has to bear the burden of the sin of fallen humanity it will also share 'the glorious liberty of the children of God'. This eschatological hope is fully shared by Luther whose expectation of the Last Day is concerned not only with the future of the individual, but also with the fact that history and the old world are coming to an end. For Paul, as well as for the great Reformer, this eschatological hope for the salvation of mankind and the liberation of creation is based solidly on the historical resurrection of Christ and the creative power of the Holy Spirit. Eschatological events are actually taking place in the midst of the present. They are existential realities. Luther's dynamic view of eschatology becomes the more impressive in the context of sixteenth century Christendom when the expectation of the Coming Age became less and less intense. Although the traditional belief in the future was still found in Church dogma, the emphasis as well as the vital sense of urgency which was once placed on it were largely lost. The consciousness of history was drastically changed and the understanding of it had become very static. Against the sixteenth century European context Luther's

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<sup>19</sup> Bornkamm, p.192.

<sup>20</sup> LW 25, 360.

<sup>21</sup> LW 25, 361.

<sup>22</sup> *Table Talk*, 1,678.

<sup>23</sup> LW 25, 362.

understanding of history and the future of the world are not only dynamic but also prophetic. In fact authentic prophetism is always dynamic and not static.

For Luther the goal of human history and the future of the entire [p. 286](#) creation are absolutely inseparable. Not only does he expect the individual to continue to live in the future beyond death and that human history will meet its *eschaton* and find its consummation in the Kingdom of God, the entire world, Luther believes, will find its renewal and perfection in God's new creation.<sup>24</sup>

The belief that God does not abandon His creation but transforms, renews, redeems and ultimately glorifies it was a much needed corrective to the prevailing eschatology of the sixteenth century which was often 'worldless' and which excluded all creation apart from the individual.

But like the Apostle Paul, the Reformer has to confess humbly that much of the truth concerning the future of mankind and the entire creation is still hidden and must remain a matter of hope. This is how Luther expresses it when commenting on [Romans 8:24](#), 'Now hope that is seen is not hope':

Thus hope changes the one who hopes into what is hoped for, but what is hoped for does not appear. Therefore hope transfers him into the unknown, the hidden, and the dark shadows, so that he does not even know what he hopes for, and yet he knows what he does not hope for. Thus the soul has become hope and at the same time the thing hoped for, because it resides in that which it does not see, that is, in hope.<sup>25</sup>

There is perhaps hardly a more appropriate way of summing up the great Reformer's thought on the future of nature and redeemed humanity than to quote from his comment on [II Peter 3:13](#), 'But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells':

How this will take place we do not know, except that it is promised that there will be the kind of heaven and earth in which there will be no sins, but that only righteousness and God's Children will dwell there ... Here one may be concerned about whether the blessed will live in heaven or on earth. Here the text gives the impression that they will dwell on earth, so that all heaven and earth will be a new Paradise, in which God resides. For God dwells not only in heaven but everywhere. Therefore the elect will be where He is.<sup>26</sup>

What have been briefly considered so far are only certain aspects of Luther's thought on nature. It is by no means an exhaustive study. Understanding Luther's thought is one thing—which is itself a difficult [p. 287](#) task—considering its relevance and significance in the Christian witness in Asia today is quite another.

## THE NATURALISTIC-MONISTIC THOUGHT OF ASIA

The moment we try to bring Luther's thought to bear upon the Christian witness in Asia, we immediately find ourselves involved in a most delicate and controversial issue, namely, the matter of contextualization and the problem of the communication of the Gospel. The understanding of context is obviously one of the most important prerequisites of contextualization. This in itself is an enormous task. Asia's vastness alone is enough to discourage anyone from attempting seriously to understand the complexity

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<sup>24</sup> WA 37, 68; LW 34, 139.

<sup>25</sup> LW 25, 364.

<sup>26</sup> LW 30, 197–8.

of its socio-political and religious dynamics and realities. Here in Asia there is simply no one homogeneous context but a great multiplicity of contexts. Consequently, there is also no universally accepted norm, standard or methodology by which Asia may be categorically measured, perceived and interpreted.

Apart from the already problematic socio-political, religious and cultural barriers that exist between Luther's Europe and modern Asia, there is also the long time-gap between the age of Luther and that of the contemporary Asian: a gap of about half a millennium. In the light of the foregoing preliminary remarks we must patiently and graciously bear with whatever generalization, misinterpretations, and distortions are bound to occur in our modest attempt to bring Luther's insight on nature to bear upon the Christian witness in Asia today.

Although there is a great variety of religious systems and traditions in Asia, they all seem to have one basic feature in common, that is, they are all nature-conscious; ranging from the most highly developed and sophisticated Taoist-Confucianist system down to the most primitive form of animism. They are nature-conscious in the sense that they all must grapple and wrestle constantly and seriously with nature in their attempt to apprehend the totality of existence. In the end most, if not all of them, have become naturalistic and monistic in character.

We have good reason to believe that even after thirty-three years of Communist rule—whether it is in the form of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, Maoist Revisionism, or Post-Gang of Four heterodoxy—traditional Taoist-Confucianist thinking still has a very strong hold on the mind of the Chinese. And this represents a quarter of the human race! Following the 'open-door' policy of the present Chinese regime in recent years there are clear indications and signs of a resurgence of Confucianism, Taoism and other religio-philosophical systems in the p. 288 Chinese mainland. In Taiwan, both Orthodox Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism are still very influential systems to be seriously reckoned with. This phenomenon, in varying degrees, is also to be found in other parts of East Asia including Japan and Korea. As recently as February of this year, the Singapore government decided to include Confucianism in its wholesale effort to promote moral and religious education in Singapore.<sup>27</sup>

As long as the Taoist-Confucianist apprehension of the totality of life is based on naturalism, monism and humanism it will continue to pose a challenge to the Christian faith, which is essentially a witness to the living and personal God who is the Creator of the universe and Lord of history. It is precisely here that Luther's thought on nature becomes immediately significant and relevant, especially with its emphasis and paradoxical affirmation on the immanence as well as the transcendence of God. Ultimately, it is the personal and divine will of the Creator that must be constantly sought and not the harmony between man and his universe. Because it is God alone who is the Author as well as the Sustainer of harmony.

What has been said about the Taoist-Confucianist tradition is also, to a considerable extent true of Hinduism although the latter may express itself in many diverse forms: in theism, polytheism, pantheism, atheism and materialism. Thus, it is often said to be impossible to define or understand Hinduism, and rightly so. Yet, even in this vast religio-philosophical jungle of Hinduism the discerning mind can still perceive some of those main features which make Hinduism Hindu. For example, its naturalistic monism upon which the whole of existence is apprehended and its innate assumption that man is essentially one with Nature. In the mighty ocean of naturalistic monism every form of expression is possible and legitimate. There is thus in Hinduism a most impressive but

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<sup>27</sup> See *The Straits Times* on Thursday, February 4, 1982, front page.

ever intriguing hospitality that seems absolutely inexhaustible. In this sense Hinduism knows no criterion, and cannot possibly have one when it comes to the vital matter of truth.

Naturalistic monism finds its fullest expression in the concept of *moksha*, which means salvation or deliverance. *Moksha*, to put it simply in Hindu thinking, means 'absolute separateness from all duality or plurality of existence and a return to the primordial Oneness of Totality.'<sup>28</sup> A closer look at the diverse religious phenomena in Asia will reveal that this deep-rooted desire to return to the 'primordial Oneness of Totality' is not peculiar to Hinduism and other highly p. 289 developed religious systems of Asia, it is also a dominant idea in many less sophisticated forms of tribal and animistic religions, whether in Asia or in many other parts of the world. Again, the primary concern here is not that of man's relationship with God, the Creator personally conceived, but with an abstract, impersonal and mysterious Idea.

Unlike the Confucianist tradition where there is a clear focus on man as a social and political being and man is thus given a recognized place in society so that he serves a useful function within the social order, Hinduism has never succeeded in liberating itself from its caste-ridden bondage. As long as its deep-seated idea of *dharma* is upheld, Hinduism will have no chance of setting itself free from its abhorrent caste-system, because it is *dharma* which gives the Hindu caste-system its divine sanction. Precisely because this system is a divinely sanctioned social order, the individual is obliged to live according to the *dharma* of his caste. So the vicious circle goes on forever. The challenge that the whole caste-system poses before the Christian witness in Asia is an enormous one. Enormous because it has to do with the biblical view of man, especially his dignity, honour, and worth in the world and before God (*Coram Deo*). And the Christian view of man is solidly based on the biblical doctrine of creation, especially on the clear notion that all human beings are created equally by God who shows no partiality. Luther clearly has a great deal to say on this. From the view-point of Christian witness, the concern here is not only with the religious aspect of the doctrine but its sociopolitical and ethical implications as well.

Closely allied to the foregoing ideas of the Oneness of Totality, *moksha* and *dharma* are Hindu understandings of *Atman* according to which the existence of the individual and personal being is a mere illusion. Stretched to its logical conclusion this line of thinking cannot possibly admit any notion of individual responsibility and accountability. The socio-political and ethical implications of this doctrine are simply inconceivable. If individuality is denied, no real distinction can possibly be made between God, man and things of the world. Moreover, the Hindu doctrine of *maya*, whether it is represented by Upanishadic philosophy or the *advaita* of Sankara, virtually denies the reality of the created world. When the reality of the created world is denied it will be very difficult to conceive of any possibility of responsible participation in the things of the world. This can only lead to either passive world-denying or thoroughgoing materialism. The absence of an adequate doctrine of creation in Hinduism also gives rise to pantheistic thinking which makes the world indistinguishable from Brahman. Although ideas or conceptions of God or the Divine p. 290 are forever present in Hinduism, its monistic and pantheistic tendencies are so steeped in an atmosphere of immanence that there is virtually no room for real transcendence. Only Luther's paradoxical approach which is solidly based on biblical revelation on creation can do real justice to divine immanence and transcendence.

If the reality of the created world is denied, history, which can only occur within the time and space of the created order, cannot be taken seriously either. Thus the Hindu

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<sup>28</sup> Hendrik Kraemer *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, (Grand Rapids 1969) p.161

world-view evolves around an endless cycle. *Karma* and redemption are conceived within this frame of mind. The cyclic view of life knows no real history and eschatology. By a striking contrast there is much dynamism in Luther's view of history and eschatology which is based on an equally dynamic understanding of creation. This point is of vital importance for authentic Christian witness in Asia. Asia has indeed reached a crucial point of decision. Asian people must be awakened to face the reality of the *eschaton*. They are in desperate need of a real sense of urgency. The whole of existence must no longer be conceived in endless cyclical terms but in linear terms; in terms of the entire creation moving towards its final goal. In view of the impending judgement of God even a linear understanding of history and eschatology is not enough. Time must be perceived not only in terms of *Chronos* but also in terms of *Kairos*. It is the *Kairos* of God that creates a crisis situation for man. And a crisis situation always demands a clear-cut choice of either/or from man. Only this dynamic and existential perception of history can do real justice to the biblical view of creation. It is here that Luther's thought on nature once again finds its immediate relevance for the Christian witness in Asia today. There is hardly any other area of concern that is more urgent than this in Asia today. For time is really running out for Asia eschatologically speaking. People here are indeed living on 'borrowed time'.

## BIBLICAL VIEW OF MAN AND NATURE

In the naturalistic-monistic system there is undoubtedly much concern with man's relation to nature. There is, however, hardly any religio-philosophical system which expresses and affirms the sense of solidarity between man and nature more clearly and consistently than the biblical revelation. This sense of solidarity is taken most seriously in Luther's thought on man and nature, as has been the case in his commentary on [Romans 8:18-25](#) as well as in many other contexts. However, solidarity here does not mean identification so that man and nature become indistinguishable. It is used here as a relational term **P. 291** with the emphasis on man's divinely ordained stewardship in the world, especially on man's divine responsibility for the created order as God's faithful agent. One of the major crises in the world today is precisely the loss of this sense of stewardship. The deplorable pollution of the environment; the relentless exploitation of nature; the irresponsible use and abuse of nature resources; the lack of any sense of equality and proportion in the distribution of wealth derived from natural resources, together with a host of other ecological concerns are no longer confined to Asia. They are also global issues. These issues must seriously and be thoroughly dealt with in the whole context of man's stewardship, responsibility and accountability before God. This is ultimately a *theological* issue.

God's original creation is characterized by order and harmony. But order and harmony have been disrupted by man's rebellion against God, the Creator. Man's rebellious act has resulted in strained relations on different levels: the relation between man and God, the relation between man and nature, and the relation between man and his neighbour. The ground is said to have been 'cursed' on account of man's sin. That the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament has faithfully and consistently preserved this profound sense of solidarity between man and nature is clear from passages such as [Isaiah 24:3-6](#):

The earth shall be utterly laid waste and utterly despoiled; for the Lord has spoken this word. The earth mourns and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched, and few men are left.



It is with the same sense of solidarity that the Apostle Paul expresses himself with such a profound insight and vision concerning the future of man and the whole of creation in [Romans 8:18–25](#). No wonder the great Reformer finds the passage so exciting and challenging. It is, however, significant to observe that both in [Isaiah 24](#) and [Romans 8](#) the pollution and the decay of nature are set against the context of man's relation to God. In [Isaiah 24:5, 6](#):

The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed the laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth ...

Man's behaviour in the world has a direct bearing on his environment. The pollution of the earth is believed to have been caused by the religious and moral acts of man. In [Romans 8:18–25](#) the liberation of creation [p. 292](#) from bondage is inseparable from the ultimate redemption of the children of God. Therefore, 'the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the Sons of God' (v. [19](#)). It has become sufficiently clear that while the naturalistic-monistic tradition is more concerned with man's relation to the whole cosmos than with his relation to God, the biblical tradition which Luther faithfully follows gives primary importance to man's reconciliation with God. Only the reconciled can become the reconciler. Only those who have peace with God can play the role of a peace-maker. St. Paul must have clearly perceived this great truth when he says in [II Corinthians 5:17–19](#):

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ([II Corinthians 5:17–19](#)).

In Asia today there is much craving for advance in science and technology and for modernization in order to solve the problems of food and a host of other bare necessities created by Asia's ever-increasing population. Unless this craving, however legitimate it may appear, is being effectively checked, the problem of pollution and other related ecological issues will continue to be aggravated. When it comes to the matter of tapping of natural resources it is very difficult to know if those measures taken are actually justifiable and are eventually benefiting the needy Asians or whether they are simply relentless means of satisfying the greed of the exploiters who are neither concerned with the welfare of the needy nor with the sanctity of nature itself. The tragic and undeniable fact is that in many parts of Asia today the earth, the forest and the beach etc., often lie polluted because men have 'transgressed the laws'.

Luther has a particular fondness for God's common creatures, whether they are young children, animals, trees, flowers or plants. To him the common and the ordinary are beautiful and precious. 'We possess such beautiful creatures; but we pay little attention to them, because they are so common', Luther complains.<sup>29</sup>

Although many exciting and extraordinary things are found in Asia, she remains largely a land of the common and ordinary, especially common and ordinary people. Overwhelmed by the ever-growing sea of humanity in Asia it is almost impossible to think or believe that individuals still count or that they are still precious. Asian Christians [p. 293](#) must continue to bear witness to the sanctity of human life and human existence, especially to the honour, glory and dignity which God the Creator and Father of all mankind has bestowed upon all His Children. What God has created, man must not call

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<sup>29</sup> Table Talk, 5, 5539.

common or profane ([Acts 10:15](#)). Luther seems to have seen this point clearly in his exegesis on [John 1:14](#) 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth'. In the flesh which is a 'common' creation of God Luther sees the incarnate Christ identifying himself with sinful humanity and draws great comfort from it:

Thus the most precious treasure and the strongest consolation we Christians have is this: that the Word, the true and natural Son of God, became man, with flesh and blood like that of any other human; that He became incarnate for our sakes in order that we might enter into great glory ...<sup>30</sup>

Having become a true and natural man Christ 'dwelt among us':

He did not withdraw from people, retire into some shelter, escape into the desert, where no one could hear, see, or touch Him. But he appeared publicly, preaching and performing miracles, thereby enabling all the people who were about Him, among whom He moved and lived, to hear and touch Him.<sup>31</sup>

It is this incarnate Christ whom we must proclaim in Asia today. For Christ alone is the hope for Asia.

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**Choong Chee Pang is Principal and Lecturer in New Testament at Trinity Theological College, Singapore** **p. 294**

# The Two Governments and the Two Kingdoms

John R. Stephenson

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The facet of his thought commonly referred to as the doctrine of the two kingdoms has provoked some of the most intractable confusion and bitter controversy in post-war continental Luther scholarship, and the ripples of this debate which reached these shores have all too often amounted to a litany of sweeping statements which have done nothing to enhance the Reformer's reputation in England. Yet even before Hitler's war Luther had endured a century of disfavour among the leading academic and ecclesiastical circles on this side of the Channel. So marked was British—more particularly, English—distaste for Luther in the opening years of this century that the American church historian Preserved Smith devoted an article to the subject in 1917, listing Anglo-Catholicism, rationalism, socialism and—since 1914—visceral hostility to all things German as four factors which

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<sup>30</sup> LW 22, 110.

<sup>31</sup> LW 22, 112.

had conspired to tarnish the Reformer's image in the minds of the English of that time.<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years later the celebrated Modernist H. D. A. Major was to lament that, 'Today Martin Luther, the greatest protagonist of the Reformation, is viewed as a vulgar, violent and mistaken man as hostile to humanist culture as he was to social democracy.'<sup>2</sup> The European conflict of the next decade provided the cue for the most damaging slur of all on the Reformer's memory, so that when in 1945, a third-rate pamphleteer denigrated Luther as 'Hitler's spiritual ancestor'<sup>3</sup> his thesis had already been expressed by Archbishop William Temple, who had died the previous year. The smouldering dislike of the Reformer having been thus fanned into a blaze of contempt, it is to be feared that—despite the post-war Luther studies of Professors Rupp, Atkinson and Watson—Major's words are as true today as when he wrote them half a century ago. And there is no dimension of Luther's thought which has aroused such antipathy as his doctrine of the two kingdoms. It need only be recalled that a recent writer of humanist persuasion has, in the context of the outworking of this doctrine in the Peasants' War, seen fit to compare the Reformer with none other than Robespierre!<sup>4</sup> Before such charges can be countered, the structure and content of the two kingdoms doctrine must be outlined.

## GOVERNMENT OR KINGDOM?

The perplexity which bedevils scholarly discussion of the doctrine of the two kingdoms is reflected in the fact that the most eminent Luther scholars are unable to agree among themselves about its very name. There is good reason for this discord among the learned, for under the rubric 'two kingdoms' there lurks not one doctrine but two. On the one hand, Luther was concerned with the antithesis, expressed most sharply by the New Testament and St. Augustine, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil. His first forays into theology as an Erfurt friar had caused him to become acquainted with the ceaseless combat between those who follow Cain in adhering to the *civitas terrena* and living in bondage to the finite goods of this transient life and those who follow Abel in cleaving to the imperishable Good which will be enjoyed in the everlasting Sabbath prepared for the members of the *civitas Dei*. On the other hand, however, Luther was also concerned with correctly apprehending God's present sovereignty over Christendom, the *Corpus Christianum*. In this case the model of the journey of the pilgrim people of God through a hostile world which is at root a *civitas diaboli* was no longer adequate. Hence, in addition to thinking in terms of the implacable enmity which obtains between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil, Luther could also explain how God exercises his sovereignty over all men through two 'governments' represented by spiritual and secular authority respectively. His so-called doctrine of the two kingdoms is in fact a pragmatic combination of these two conceptual pairs, the first of contrasts and the second of correlates. These two schemes are reflected in the preferred terminology of the opposing factions of Luther scholars. Should the accent be placed on the dualism of the kingdoms of God and the devil, then favour will be shown to the formulation 'doctrine of the two kingdoms' (*Zwei-Reiche-Lehre*). Alternatively, should chief emphasis be given to

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<sup>1</sup> 'English Opinion of Luther', *Harvard Theological Review* (1917) p.157.

<sup>2</sup> 'Editorial Preface', *The Modern Churchman* (1932), p.225.

<sup>3</sup> P. Wiener: *Martin Luther. Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor*. (London, 1945) cf. the spirited reply by E. G. Rupp. *Martin Luther—Hitler's Cause or Cure?* (London, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Marius: *Luther* (London, 1975), p.203.

the inter-relation of God's two complementary modes of rule, then one will speak, as do the majority of Luther scholars, of the 'doctrine of the two governments' (*Zwei-Regimente-Lehre*). Since the two kingdoms doctrine which emerges from a coalition of these two strains in the Reformer's thought encompasses the entirety of divine activity in both preserving the fallen Creation and leading it to salvation in Christ, it could be used as a kind of conceptual clotheshorse on which to spread out the whole of [P. 296](#) his theology. But even though this scheme would be ideally suited to provide the author of yet another comprehensive account of Luther's thought with a systematic structure in which to arrange his successive chapters, it cannot be sufficiently stressed that the Reformer's motive in recasting this traditional concept—or concepts—was not speculative but pastoral. This is made plain by the writing of 1523 which forms the most propitious source for our understanding of Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, the significantly titled *On Secular Authority—to What Extent We Owe It Obedience*. In this brief treatise the Reformer sought to return an answer to two fundamental questions. First, what is the purpose and task of secular authority and what—in view of Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount—should be the attitude of a Christian called to exercise it? Secondly, what are the proper limits of secular authority and what is the fitting relationship between it and spiritual authority?

Luther avers at the outset of *On Secular Authority* that the exercise of governmental power is not founded on the consent of the governed (as has been almost universally supposed since the Enlightenment), but on the ordinance of God. He accordingly appeals to [Rom. 13:1](#) and [1 Pet. 2:13](#).<sup>5</sup> The reason for the establishment of secular authority lies in the divine will to preserve the fallen Creation and to prevent sinful man from tearing God's world apart. At this juncture Luther invokes the two kingdoms dualism: 'We are obliged here to divide Adam's children and all men into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God (*reych Gottis*) and the second to the kingdom of the world (*reych der welt*).<sup>6</sup> The first of these categories is made up of 'all proper believers in Christ, who, in theory at least, have no need of secular government, for 'true Christians' are taught by the Holy Spirit to persevere in well-doing and to be prepared meekly to endure whatever injury and injustice may be inflicted on them.<sup>7</sup> It is quite otherwise with those who belong to the *reych der welt*, and it is for the purpose of restraining these unruly spirits that God has established, quite apart from his own kingdom, another 'government' (*regiment*), based not on the free direction of the Spirit but on the coercion of the sword.<sup>8</sup> Indeed God has established two governments which correspond to and cater for the subjects of the two kingdoms: 'God has therefore ordained two *regiment(s)*: the spiritual which by the Holy Spirit produces Christians and pious folk under Christ, and the secular [p. 297](#) which restrains un-Christian and evil folk so that they are obliged to keep outward peace, albeit by no merit of their own'.<sup>9</sup> It is essential to grasp that Luther regards secular government within this framework as an integral part of the good divine work of preservation, for—especially when it conscientiously respects its appointed limits—civil authority acts as a curb against the kingdom of the devil. Accordingly, although its coercive authority must partially take the form of punishment and notwithstanding the fact that, as a tool of God's

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<sup>5</sup> WA 11. 247, 21–30.

<sup>6</sup> WA 11. 249, 24–25.

<sup>7</sup> WA 11. 249, 36–250, 9.

<sup>8</sup> WA 11. 251, 1–8.

<sup>9</sup> WA 11. 251, 15–18.

wrath, it must work his *opus alienum*, the eye of faith may discern in secular authority a manifestation—albeit usually blurred and at times outright paradoxical—of divine love. Perception of the divine benevolence which undergirds the exercise of order-creating authority in all spheres of light ought not, however, to lead to an unbalanced, ‘enthusiastic’ and ultimately idolatrous estimate of the function and competence of secular rule. The business of government at all levels is to patch up and preserve a non-ideal reality, and were its task to be compared with that of the modern hospital, then it might more properly be likened to the casualty department than to that of plastic surgery. That is to say, as a preservative of the fallen Creation secular authority operates under the law, being only indirectly related to the gospel which, as the life-giving message of the forgiveness of sin for Christ’s sake, plants the new Creation in the midst of the old. As it is customarily employed, the term ‘social gospel’ is therefore a theological nonsense. Luther has a parable in *On Secular Authority* which speaks directly to the enthusiasm of the ‘social gospel’. To rule the world with the gospel would, he contends, be like a shepherd putting wolves, lions, eagles and sheep all together in the same fold. In blissful naïveté the shepherd bids these creatures of disparate temperament enjoy their fodder in peace unhindered by the coercion of dogs or clubs. The sheep, surmises the Reformer, will indeed follow the ways of peace, but not for long.<sup>10</sup>

## THE USE OF LAW

In teaching that government is to take place under the law, or rather according to the ‘first use of the law’, Luther is far from advocating a biblicistic theocracy with the law of Moses on the statute book. As he contended against the legalist Karlstadt, the Mosaic law is simply the ‘Jewish common law’ (*der Juden Sachsenspiegel*)<sup>11</sup>, its enduring validity being contingent on its consonance with the dictates of natural [P. 298](#) law. The Mosaic law in general and the Decalogue in particular are simply the clearest summary of a natural moral law revealed in the consciences of all men. Even Christ’s ‘golden rule’ is nothing more than an expression of such law: ‘For nature teaches how love acts, namely, that I ought to do as I would have done to myself.’<sup>12</sup> In company with the natural knowledge of God, the natural knowledge of binding moral precepts is obscured and suppressed by the wilful egotism of Adamic man. Even so, enough remains of the primal deposit for God to turn to good account in his work of preservation. In this context Luther delights in heaping praise on the sages and rulers of pagan antiquity. Such an encomium is to be found in the *Fürstenspiegel* which the Reformer wrote in 1534/35 in the guise of an exposition of [Ps. 101](#). The dominant concept of the exposition is *Regiment*, a term which makes no fewer than ninety-five appearances in this short writing. In the course of his explanation of [Ps. 101:5](#) Luther contends that, since its business is with bodily and temporal goods and not with the eternal salvation of souls, God has subjected the ‘*weltlich regiment*’ to reason: ‘The pagans are therefore able to speak and teach well on this subject, and have in fact done so. To tell the truth, they are far more skilful than Christians in these matters’.<sup>13</sup> The Reformer therefore counsels those who would acquire wisdom concerning the administration of secular government to heed the literary treasures of pagan antiquity.

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<sup>10</sup> WA 11. 252. 3–11.

<sup>11</sup> WA 18.81, 14–17 (*Wider die himmlischen Propheten*, 1525).

<sup>12</sup> WA 11. 279, 19–20.

<sup>13</sup> WA 51. 242,6–8.



The preservation of ‘the poets and histories, such as Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes, Cicero, Livy and afterwards the fine jurists of old’ is to be ascribed to a kindly Providence which wished the pagans to have ‘their prophets, apostles, theologians and preachers for the *weltlich regiment*’.<sup>14</sup> Secular government can function quite independently of the Christian faith, so that Luther could point out from the pulpit that the emperor need not be a saint or even a Christian: ‘*Satis est ad Caesarem, ut habeat rationem*’.<sup>15</sup>

It would be quite mistaken to infer from Luther’s admission that secular authority can be exercised independently of the ethos of Christendom that he deemed this an ideal state of affairs. On the contrary, firmly convinced that the business of government ‘as a special way of serving God pertains to Christians above all others on earth’,<sup>16</sup> the Reformer did not neglect to augment the literary genre of the *Fürstenpiegel* or ‘manual of the Christian prince’ which had been a constant p. 299 feature of the Church’s homiletic tradition since the days of St. Augustine. The third part of *On Secular Authority* and the expositions of [Ps. 82](#) and [101](#) fall into this category. The duly called minister of the Word has, in Luther’s opinion, not only the right but also the solemn duty to remind the bearer of the sword of his duty before God: ‘If a preacher in his official capacity says to kings and princes ... “Consider and fear God and keep his commandments,” he is not meddling in the affairs of secular authority (*weltlich Oberkeyt*). On the contrary, he is thereby rendering service and obedience to the supreme authority (*hohesten Oberkeyt*).’<sup>17</sup> For his own part Luther counsels the Christian prince in *On Secular Authority* to trust in God and to be diligent in prayer; to use his office for the service of his subjects; to sift his minister’s advice with due discrimination; and to deal firmly with evildoers, yet erring on the side of leniency rather than severity.<sup>18</sup> These pages are imbued with Luther’s characteristic appeal to commonsense, urging the prince to eschew slavish adherence to positive written law, subjecting the latter ‘to reason, whence it has welled up as from a fountain’: ‘let reason remain master of law.’<sup>19</sup> It would thus appear that Luther can hold that—theoretically—secular government and Christendom have nothing to do with each other, while averring at the same time that—practically—they have everything to do with each other. His view of the ideal relationship of God’s two modes of rule is that while they ought to be distinct from one another, they are yet inextricably linked: ‘neither is sufficient in the world without the other.’<sup>20</sup> But since the two governments rarely, if ever, complement one another according to the ideal theological blueprint of the Middle Ages, Luther’s view of the *weltlich regiment* must lack total consistency. While both governments were instituted to withstand the power of the devil, both in fact oscillate between the opposing kingdoms. The Reformer can accordingly contend both that ‘God intends the secular *Regiment* to be a model of ... the kingdom of heaven’<sup>21</sup> and—changing into eschatological gear—that ‘Both kingdoms existed simultaneously at Rome, Emperor Nero ruling one against Christ

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<sup>14</sup> WA 51. 242,36–243, 3.

<sup>15</sup> WA 27. 418,4.

<sup>16</sup> WA 11. 258,1–3.

<sup>17</sup> WA 51. 240, 7–10.

<sup>18</sup> WA 11. 278, 17–23.

<sup>19</sup> WA 11. 280, 16–17; 272, 16–17.

<sup>20</sup> WA 11. 252, 14.

<sup>21</sup> WA 51, 241, 39–40.

and Christ ruling the other through his Apostles Peter and Paul against the devil.’<sup>22</sup> The inconsistency here lies not in Luther’s mind, but in the changeable countenance of society.

The writing of *On Secular Authority* was partly occasioned by a p. 300 query raised by the greatest living authority on jurisprudence in the Empire, Johann Freiherr von Schwarzenberg, who was troubled by the apparent disharmony of Scripture which could affirm the coercive power of the sword in the apostolic writings while at the same time, supremely in the Sermon on the Mount, seeming to rule out recourse to or participation in its operations. The solution proffered by medieval Catholicism to the dilemma posed by the incongruity of the moral teachings of Moses and Jesus or—to adopt the Thomist idiom—between the old law and the new had been the division of Christians into the secular and religious estates. Those in the former category, including *par excellence* the bearers of the sword, were obliged simply to fulfil the divine precepts; while those who quitted the world for the cloister were to attain perfection by freely taking on them the yoke of the higher morality prescribed in the ‘evangelical counsels’ of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>23</sup> By bringing the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers out of cold storage, Luther was able to annul the medieval division of Christians into secular and religious. And his understanding of the Sermon on the Mount was not, as is popularly supposed, restricted to its role as fodder for the ‘second use of the law’, in which context its impossibly high standards would provoke smitten consciences to turn from the hopeless path of justification by works to crave absolution from the gospel. For the Reformer also acknowledged that the severe demands issued by Jesus in [Mt. 5–7](#) are commands binding on all Christians.<sup>24</sup> Even so, the application of his exegetical maxim, ‘*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*’, made it plain that the Sermon on the Mount could not possibly mean what the pacifist (or anarchist?) Anabaptists took it to mean. Luther was accordingly led to distinguish between the various situations in which the Christian must necessarily find himself. Always charged *coram Deo* with the commandment to love, the Christian is brought face to face with this immutable imperative in widely differing circumstances. Should only his own interests be at stake in a given situation, then the law of love dictates the path of renunciation of self prescribed in [Mt. 5–7](#) which took Jesus to the Cross. On the other hand, the Christian may be called to practise love in a context where not his own but his neighbour’s interests are at stake. In this case the Sermon on the Mount does not apply. Luther accordingly distinguishes between two persons present within each believer: the Christian as he exists before God and for himself (*Christperson*), and the Christian in society (*Weltperson*), clad in a p. 301 particular office (*Amt*)—for example, that of parenthood or governmental authority—which entails responsibility for others.<sup>26</sup> As *Weltperson* the Christian can in good conscience both seek redress for his neighbour from the civil power and, when called to do so, himself exercise that power for the benefit of others. The exercise of secular authority in faith can even be considered as a form of worship, (*Gottis dienst*): ‘As a special kind of *Gottis dienst* the sword and the authority of government pertain to Christians before all other folk on earth.’<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> WA 51, 238, 38–239, 1.

<sup>23</sup> See *Thomas Aquinas; Summa Theologica* II–II, qu. 183, 184, 186.

<sup>24</sup> WA 11. 245, 23–25; 259, 17–19.

<sup>26</sup> WA 11. 255, 9–15.

<sup>27</sup> WA 11. 258, 1–3.

## THE RIGHT HAND AND LEFT HAND OF GOD

A difficulty can now be resolved which has led to sharp debate in postwar Luther scholarship. It has already been remarked that *On Secular Authority* opens with the Reformer availing himself of a characteristically Augustinian dualism, resolutely distinguishing the *Reich Gottes* from the *Reich der Welt* and adamant in his insistence that the order of secular government was instituted for those who belong to the latter. Onesidedly relying on this item of Luther's teaching, Johannes Heckel deemed it impossible for the Christian to be labelled a 'citizen of two kingdoms' (*Bürger zweier Reiche*). There are two grounds for supposing that Heckel's interpretation is unfaithful to the totality of Luther's thought. First, since the Christian is not entirely free of sin until perfectly sanctified in heaven, being *simul iustus et peccator*, it is not only the unregenerate who needs the restraints supplied by the 'first use of the law'. Secondly, since the Christians does not simply lead a life of uncluttered piety before God but always exists in this world as one shouldering the responsibilities of an office (*Amt*) or calling (*Beruf*), he is rightfully subject to secular government. Luther explicitly states as much in a disputation of 1539: 'The Christian *qua* Christian moves within the first table of the law, but he also exists apart from the kingdom of heaven as a citizen of this world (*civis huius mundi*). Hence he has a dual citizenship (*utrumque politeuma*), being subject to Christ through faith and to the emperor through his body.'<sup>28</sup>

The Reformer was wont to characterise the first of these dimensions within which the Christian lives as the 'kingdom of God's right hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Rechten*) and the second as the 'kingdom of God's left hand' (*Reich Gottes zur Linken*). Commenting on [Ps. 110](#) in 1518, Luther is moved to define the 'right hand of God' as the 'kingdom (*königreich*) of Christ, which is a spiritual, hidden *reich*.' The counterpart to this kingdom, to wit, the 'visible and bodily *reich*', is aptly [p. 302](#) termed the 'left hand of God'.<sup>29</sup> A sermon delivered on 15th December 1532 illuminates Luther's understanding of the 'two kingdoms', which are here understood as identical with the 'two governments' and conceived without regard to the antithetical realms of God and the devil. Thinking of the sphere proper to the 'first use of the law', the Reformer contends that it 'is indeed our Lord God's *Reich*, albeit a temporal law and *regiment*. He wills us to respect this *Reich* with his left hand, but the *Reich* at his right hand is where he rules in person.'<sup>30</sup> This passage is important on two counts. First, it underscores the fact that the secular kingdom is not simply identical with the kingdom of Satan; rather, the 'kingdom of the left hand' was instituted to restrain evil. Secondly, as an example of Luther's use of *Reich* in the sense of *Regiment*, it points to the elasticity of these concepts in his thought. There is no clear-cut distinction between *Reich* and *Regiment*, *regnum* and *regimen*, in his usage.<sup>31</sup> The expression 'two kingdoms' therefore often sounds more dualistic than it really is. Properly understood, it is usually little more than shorthand for God's two modes of rule.

While mention of the 'two kingdoms' almost invariably conjures up the figure of Martin Luther, he is demonstrably not the parent of the concept in either of its two senses. The idea of the opposing kingdoms of God and the devil was rooted in the Bible and mediated to medieval Christendom through the theology of S. Augustine. And the idea of the two correlate powers through which God governs the Christian world was outlined as

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<sup>28</sup> WA 39 II. 81, 16–18.

<sup>29</sup> WA 1. 692, 8–11.

<sup>30</sup> WA 36. 385, 6–9.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Paul Althaus; *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, 1972), p.49.

early as 494 by Pope Gelasius I in a letter to Emperor Anastasius I: 'There are, august emperor, two means by which this world is principally governed, namely the consecrated authority of the pontiffs and the royal power.'<sup>32</sup> The ideal relationship between the bearer of the secular sword and the one whose only legitimate weapon was the sword of the Spirit was doubtless initially intended to rest on mutual equality and careful avoidance by each of infringement in the other's proper sphere. Gelasius' successor Symmachus thought to strike a fitting balance with his suggestion to the same emperor, 'Defer to God in us and we shall defer to God in you.'<sup>33</sup> For the purposes of this paper it is essential to recollect the runaway inflation of the papal claims during the millenium which separated Luther from Gelasius I. Boniface VIII's *Unam Sanctam* of 1302 represents the pinnacle of this development with its insistence that the secular sword is rightfully p. 303 subordinate to the spiritual sword wielded by the Pope and that it ought to be exercised on behalf of the Church. Boniface claims for the Pope the right to judge and, should the need arise, to depose secular rulers, while averring that the successor of Peter, as the '*homo spiritualis*' of [1 Cor. 2:15](#), is subject to the superior jurisdiction of God alone.<sup>34</sup> Only against the backcloth of these claims can we comprehend the vehemence of Luther's reaction to the medieval blurring of the boundary between the spiritual and secular spheres. Forgetful of the sharp antithesis of law and gospel, the medieval Church has illicitly compounded the two to produce a Pelagianising account of the justification of the sinner. The Reformer likewise found the Christendom of his day guilty of standing the divinely established order on its head by permitting the higher clergy to assume political authority and by encouraging secular rulers to employ coercive means in the resolution of religious difficulties: 'The Pope and the bishops should look to their episcopal duty and preach God's Word. This task they have neglected to become secular princes, ruling through laws which pertain only to the body and property. They have finely turned (God's order) inside out, for while they are supposed to rule souls inwardly through God's Word, in fact they rule castles, cities, land and people outwardly, torturing soul with unspeakable murder. Secular lords are likewise meant to rule land and people outwardly. Neglectful of this task, ... they wish to rule souls in a spiritual capacity.'<sup>35</sup> In view of this dual danger, Luther contends that, 'I am constantly obliged to beat, hammer, drive and knock in the distinction between these two kingdoms, even though I should write and speak about it so often that it becomes wearisome. For the accursed devil is unceasingly cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into one.'<sup>36</sup>

## LIMITS TO THE TWO GOVERNMENTS

The second part of *On Secular Authority* deals with the question of the proper limits of spiritual and secular government and with the grave problem of the extent of the subject's duty to obey commands which go beyond the competence of their giver. The Reformer was prompted to turn his mind to these issues by the outbreak of bloody persecution of 'evangelicals' which marked the beginning of the Counter-Reformation. 1st July 1523 saw the Augustinian friars Henricus Vos and Jan van P. 304 den Eschen burned at the stake in

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<sup>32</sup> Denzinger-Schönmetzer: *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, no. 347.

<sup>33</sup> Denzinger-Schönmetzer: op. cit., no. 362.

<sup>34</sup> Denzinger-Schönmetzer: op. cit., no. 468.

<sup>35</sup> WA 11. 265, 7–19.

<sup>36</sup> WA 51. 239, 22–25.

Brussels marketplace; and meanwhile, nearer home, Luther's *bête noire* Duke George had forbidden the sale of his translation of the New Testament in ducal Saxony and demanded the surrender of those copies already distributed. Against this background Luther enquires 'how long the arm (of secular government) may extend and how far its hand may reach, lest it should overreach itself by assaulting God in his *reych und regiment*'<sup>37</sup> His answer is that 'secular government has laws which extend no further than the body and property and what is external on earth.'<sup>38</sup> Yet even within the bounds of the 'kingdom of the left hand' no secular ruler is entitled to unquestioning obedience. Already in the treatise *Von den guten Werken* of 1520 Luther teaches that the duty to obey earthly rulers rests on the supreme authority of the Decalogue, the scope of whose fourth (fifth) injunction he widens to embrace territorial and spiritual parenthood as embodied in secular rulers and bearers of ecclesiastical office. The subject's duty to obey is, however, qualified by the *clausula Petri* of [Acts 5:29](#): 'Should it transpire, as is in fact often the case, that secular authority and *Obrigkeit*, as it is called, should try to persuade a subject to act contrary to God's commands, or to prevent him from keeping them, then his obedience is at an end and his duty is abrogated. We must here echo St. Peter's statement to the Jewish rulers: 'We must obey God more than men.'<sup>39</sup> Luther immediately gives a concrete instance of the application of the *clausula Petri* with his contention that no upright soldier should render obedience or otherwise give succour to a prince who 'wishes to go to war in a manifestly unjust cause.'<sup>40</sup> The same counsel is given three years later in *On Secular Authority*<sup>41</sup> and then repeated in a pamphlet on the ethics of war published in 1526. The reason given in the latter for not performing military service 'when you know for sure that (your lord) is in the wrong' has an unmistakably Martinian ring: 'for in this case you can have no good conscience before God.'<sup>42</sup> Nor was this principle forgotten by the aged Reformer who, in a letter of 7th April 1542, urges the soldier caught up in an unjust campaign to 'run from the field ... and save his soul.'<sup>43</sup>

While physical coercion must necessarily be employed in the 'kingdom of the left hand', it has no place in the 'kingdom of the right hand'. p. 305 Secular government has lawful jurisdiction over the body, 'but God neither can nor will let anyone rule over the soul but himself alone.'<sup>44</sup> The meaning of this statement is not that each soul is capable of immediate and private communion with God independently of the divinely willed means of grace. For in keeping with the incarnational tenor of his theology as a whole, Luther consistently taught that inward grace is not bestowed except through the outward Word and Sacraments.<sup>45</sup> Nor would it be far-fetched to ascribe to the Reformer a mediatorial conception of the ministerial office: Christ himself preaches and celebrates the three

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<sup>37</sup> WA 11. 261, 30–31.

<sup>38</sup> WA 11. 262, 7–9.

<sup>39</sup> WA 6. 265, 15–19.

<sup>40</sup> WA 6. 265, 21–26.

<sup>41</sup> WA 11. 277, 28–31.

<sup>42</sup> WA 19. 656, 22–25.

<sup>43</sup> WABR 10. 36, 157–158.

<sup>44</sup> WA 11. 262, 9–10.

<sup>45</sup> WA 18. 136, 9–18.



sacraments of baptism, eucharist and absolution through the pastor.<sup>46</sup> Yet notwithstanding this high doctrine of the ministry, Luther taught with equal consistency that the distinction of true from false doctrines is *per se* no concern of the secular authorities: 'How one believes or does not believe is a matter for the individual conscience and hence involves no injury to the secular power. The latter ought therefore to be content to attend to its own affairs, permitting men to believe this way or that ... and persuading no one by force. For faith is a free work which no one can produce by violent means.'<sup>47</sup> The cynic may hold that when Luther remarked in 1521, 'Burning heretics is not to my liking,'<sup>48</sup> he was at least partly motivated by concern for self-survival. It is therefore profitable to recall that when he himself held the upper hand in the form of the favour of the Saxon princes, the Reformer remained true to the principle of toleration. In his open letter of 1524 *Against the seditious spirit*, Luther refrains from invoking the assistance of the secular arm against the enthusiastic preaching of Thomas Müntzer. Even though the latter's teaching leads souls to destruction, it can only be countered by spiritual weapons; and the Saxon princes should intervene in Allstedt only in the event of a breach of the peace: 'Simply let them preach with vigour and confidence ... against whom they will. For as I have said, there must needs be sects (cf. [1 Cor. 11-19](#)) and the Word of God must take to the field and engage in battle ... If their spirit is genuine, it will have no fear of us and will endure; and if ours is genuine, neither will it fear them or anyone. Let the spirits go at it hammer and tongs. Should some souls be led astray in the process, so be it, this is the way of war. Some are bound to fall and suffer injury where battle is waged, but anyone who fights with integrity will p. 306 receive a crown. Should they wish to do more than fight with the Word, however, that is, should they wish to smash and smite with their fists, then Your Graces ought to intervene.'<sup>49</sup> As Heinrich Bornkamm comments, 'These words are of epochal significance in the history of toleration.'<sup>50</sup>

## THE RELEVANCE OF A VIA MEDIA

The post-war period has seen Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms become the butt of severe and at times intemperate criticism. In brief, this facet of his thought has been held responsible for an alleged surrender of political and social reality to their own devices by German Protestantism which is supposed, whether directly or indirectly, to have paved the way for the triumph of the Third Reich. The Reformer is charged with having planted a virus of unquestioning servility in the bloodstream of the German people; with having encouraged a fateful quietistic retreat from everyday life; and with having sundered the bond which subjects secular life to the restraints of Christian morality. Granted 'autonomy' by a failure of nerve on the part of its spiritual mentor, the German nation is thought to have been blown through the succeeding centuries bereft of ethical ballast and to have fallen in the fullness of time like a ripe apple into the hands of the National Socialists. Perhaps the most famous and influential expression of this accusation was given by Karl Barth in 1939 under the guise of a 'letter to France'. Seeking to uncover the root of the 'extraordinary political stupidity, confusion and helplessness of the German

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<sup>46</sup> WATR 3. 672-674; WA 50. 245, 1-20; 246, 20-29, cf. also *Confessio Augustana*, art. 5.

<sup>47</sup> WA 11. 264, 16-20.

<sup>48</sup> WA 7. 645, 36.

<sup>49</sup> WA 15. 218, 19-219, 6.

<sup>50</sup> *Martin Luther in der Mitre seines Lebens* (Göttingen, 1979), p. 146.

people', Barth contended that the latter 'is suffering from the heritage of the greatest Christian German, to wit, from Martin Luther's error concerning the relationship between law and gospel and between secular and spiritual order and power, an error whose effect was not to limit and restrict his natural paganism (*Heidentum*), but—on the contrary—to afford it ideological glorification, sustenance and encouragement.'<sup>51</sup> The ultimate cause of Barth's distaste for the two kingdoms doctrine would thus appear, on the basis of his 'letter to France', to have little to do with the substance of the Reformer's ethics but rather to lie in the structure of his own theological thought. For as has been noted above, Luther's view of the operation of secular government within the 'kingdom of the left hand' presupposes a universal revelation of divine-cum-natural law in the conscience; in other words, it breathes P. 307 the air of natural theology. In the opinion of the present writer, this is one of the most admirable features of Luther's doctrine, but, in presenting apologetics with a sound starting-point, the Reformer indicated a 'point of connection' whose very existence Barth was bound to deny.

There are at least three grounds for dismissing the charge that, with his two kingdoms doctrine, Luther was in some way 'Hitler's spiritual ancestor'. First, it would seem that the so-called 'doctrine of the two kingdoms' was not in fact the part of his social teaching which exercised the greatest influence in his native land during the four centuries which followed the Reformer's death. For this role was played by the entirely un-dualistic conception of the three 'hierarchies' (economic, political and ecclesiastical) through which God was held to govern Christendom.<sup>52</sup> While this scheme may well have fostered paternalist attitudes, it is sheer fancifulness to link it with fascism. Second, it is quite mistaken to suppose that German Protestantism on the eve of the Third Reich was predominantly Lutheran in any meaningful sense. Since the House of Hohenzollern adopted the Reformed faith in the opening years of the seventeenth century, a relentless war of attrition had been waged against the Lutheran Church by the rulers of Prussia. Police measures were taken against advocates of Lutheran Orthodoxy by the Great Elector; the martinet father of Frederick the Great forcibly suppressed the liturgical expression of the Lutheran faith in the 1730s; and Frederick William III drove a coach and horses through the Lutheran Confessions with his compulsory union of 1817. By the following century German Lutheranism had become one school of thought among several instead of a distinctive Church. It is notorious that distinctively and predominantly Lutheran Scandinavia has had a far happier political development than was vouchsafed to Germany itself, and a recent writer on Luther's social ethics has argued that there is a direct connection between these and the Scandinavian welfare states.<sup>53</sup> Luther: Beveridge's spiritual ancestor! Third, the error of National Socialism consisted not in unduly separating the two kingdoms, but in neglecting the limits imposed on the one and the rightful liberties of the other to fuse the two into a totalitarian unity which was a parody of both. The accusation that Luther advocated unbounded obedience to the commands of the secular power can only rest on ignorance of his repeated stress on the *clausula Petri*. And his advice to the soldier to decline to fight in an unjust war was relevant p. 308 precisely to the Third Reich. It may, however, be conceded that there are two ineradicable stains on the Reformer's reputation in the field of social ethics. The first stems from his well-publicised advice to the princes to make short shrift of the rebellious

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<sup>51</sup> *Eine Schweizer Stimme* (Zürich, 1945), p. 113.

<sup>52</sup> WA 50. 652.

<sup>53</sup> G. W. Forell: *Faith Active in Love. An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (New York, 1954), pp. 18, 22–25.

peasants, and the second from the elderly Luther's immoderate outbursts against the Jews. The most remarkable feature of these two sets of utterances in the present context is not that they mirror Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, but that they contravene principles which are central to it. In the first case, Luther forgets his own counsel that the prince should eschew severity and punish with leniency; in the second, that faith is a free work which cannot be produced by violent means. The two kingdoms doctrine affords the most efficacious remedy for Luther's own excesses.

While the continued usefulness of the three hierarchies conception may not be immediately apparent, the doctrine of the two kingdoms remains relevant today. Both spiritual and secular rule still oscillate between the realms of God and the devil. And, as at least two-thirds of the globe exists in the grip of a totalitarian ideology which is wilfully oblivious of the mystery of transcendence and of its corollary, namely the limits which are set to the exercise of secular power, mankind is summoned as never before to beware of any governmental or social system which assaults God in his *Reich und Regiment*. Meanwhile, where Christendom is still free to discharge an untrammelled prophetic ministry to the world about, its spokesmen in the several confessions and denominations often seem wont to absolutise one or other of those two half-truths which can be succinctly labelled 'verticalism' and 'horizontalism' respectively. Thus while Dr. Edward Norman's mordant analysis of present trends justly merits respect and, on the whole, assent, it must be asked whether he could in the end of the day be exculpated of the charge of rending the two kingdoms asunder by hinting that the Christian faith and political reality are not even indirectly related. Nor are voices lacking which suggest that the Church's primary task is to act as the midwife of political and social change, substituting a transient secularist creed from the faith once delivered to the saints. Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms manages to combine the insight that the Church's prime duty is to publish abroad the message of both the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake and the future restoration of our vitiated human nature in eternity with the acknowledgement of the essential God-pleasingness of the performance of provisional secular tasks in faith. And his realisation of the pre-eminence of the heavenly over the earthly vocation, and of the perils which beset the Christian in both these spheres, provides a salutary antidote to the idolatry of enthusiasm which would identify p. 309 law and gospel, summoning heaven and earth and producing hell. Avoiding these pitfalls, the Reformer became the architect of a *via media* which might be trodden with profit today.

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The Rev. John Stephenson lives at Westfield House, Cambridge, England. p. 310

## The Early Church as a Caring Community

Robert Banks

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*This article gives pastoral insights into the personal and social caring of the Early Church. The author details some of the implications of these for social work today.*

Even the most militant detractors of Christianity have acknowledged that the first Christians and their successors were united by a strong bond of affection and concern. Marxist writers from Engels on have pointed to the ‘revolutionary communism’ of the Jerusalem church, even if they have also spoken of the experiment’s essentially utopian character. Some of the earlier historians of the ancient world, who had little time for Christianity, also commended the social welfare innovations of Christians during the early years of Christian expansion. But the so-called ‘communism’ described in Acts was a comparatively short-lived affair and has rarely had normative status among Christian groups. And such Christian innovations as the creation of hospitals, orphanages and so on are a later phenomenon. What are we to say about the main body of Christian groups which formed a bridge between the foundation Jerusalem church and the more organised churches of the later Empire, especially the Pauline and Johannine communities about which we know the most? And do they have anything to teach us, living as we do twenty centuries later in a very different social order, about the most apposite patterns of care for others? On the face of it, it seems unlikely that this could be the case. But we should not peremptorily foreclose the issue. Christians have always had a healthy respect for the New Testament’s ability to say something relevant to their own situation. Meanwhile the widespread rediscovery of lost values in more primitive civilizations—one thinks in Australia of our own Aborigines—should encourage others to check the matter out before making up their minds.

At the outset we are faced with a problem of definition. The word ‘church’ today refers to a wide variety of things, viz., the body of Christians in a particular locality, the building in which they meet, the denomination to which they belong, the totality of Christians in the world and even the full number of believers alive or dead. In the first century things were much simpler. The word generally signified the regular local gatherings of Christians, whether meeting as a small p. 311 home-based group or larger city-wide affair.<sup>1</sup> Less frequently, it referred to the ongoing heavenly assembly around Christ in which all Christians now participate, by virtue of their inclusion in him, even as they go about their everyday activities.<sup>2</sup> These two ideas are closely related: the local churches are the expression in time and space of their heavenly counterpart. But it is in the first of these two senses, that I shall be using the word. This means that we shall concentrate on the actual experience of community which small groups of Christians shared as they regularly met together to further their common ends.<sup>3</sup> Strange as it may seem, this usage of the term does not result in a more restricted view of the matter. Instead it has the advantage of preserving a vital first-century perspective.

Along with the problem of definition, we are faced with a second difficulty. How are we to visualise these small communities in operation? For it is not only our use of the word ‘church’ which has undergone change but our understanding of what it involves as well. It requires a considerable act of imagination to divorce our minds from what customarily takes place on a Sunday today and mentally recreate what happened in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in first-century Rome. To begin, we have to remember that special buildings for meetings do not appear to have been built by Christians until the third century, and even then they were largely modifications of private dwellings. Also, groups like the one in view were probably not very large: we must think in terms of a

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. [Rom. 16:5, 23](#); [1 Cor. 14:23, 16, 19](#); [Col. 4:15, 16](#); Phlmn. 2.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. [Col. 1:18, 24](#); [Eph. 1:22](#); [3:10](#); [5:23ff.](#)

<sup>3</sup> On all this, see further R. Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting*, Sydney, Anzea, 1979.

relatively intimate circle centring around a host family. As well, the meetings possessed a high degree of informality and were not purely religious but also genuinely social occasions. (cf. [Acts 20:7–12](#); [1 Cor. 14–26](#)-40) There is no suggestion that they were conducted with the kind of solemnity and formality that surrounds most weekly Christian gatherings today. As E. Schweizer says, in his description of early Christian worship,

... the togetherness of the church and its services is not that of a theatre audience, where one or several paid actors act on the stage while everybody else is looking on. Each one takes part with his special gift ... the body of Christ is not a body of soldiers in which one sees at best the neck of the preceding man ... It is a body consisting of members living in their mutual addressing, asking, challenging, comforting, helping of Christ and his gifts.<sup>4</sup>

There are also other ways in which the early communities differed p. 312 from those familiar to us. But enough has been said to dispel the worst misconceptions people frequently have and we can fill out this sketch of early church life more adequately as we go.

## DIMENSIONS OF A CARING FAMILY

How fundamental a part does mutual care play in the activities of these communities? In what ways, and through what people, does it come to expression?

The first question is not at all difficult to answer. Care lies right at the heart of the early Christian idea of community. And for some very profound reasons. According to John, 'God ... loves us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins. Beloved, if God so loves us, we ought also to love one another' ([1 Jn. 4:10](#)) Paul insisted: 'Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who ... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant' ([Phil. 2:4, 5–7](#)). As these writers saw it, God took responsibility for each man and woman upon himself and Christ fulfilled that responsibility in his life and death. As children of the one and as servants of the other, Christians must reflect that same divine attitude and undertake that same sacrificial ministry. The apostle typifies this attitude in action. 'We were gentle among you', he says, 'like a nurse taking care of her children'. ([1 Thess. 2:7](#) cf. [2 Cor. 11:28](#)) So too his co-workers who had 'the same earnest care' in their hearts. ([2 Cor. 8:16](#); cf. [Phil. 2:20](#)) His converts are to follow suit and in their local congregations each is to 'care for God's church' and 'have the same care for one another'. ([1 Tim. 3:5](#) and [1 Cor. 12:25](#); cf. [Phil. 4:10](#)) Practically this means putting on 'compassion, kindness, lowliness ... and above all ... love'. ([Col. 3:12–14](#); cf. [1 Pet. 1:22](#)) Everyone should 'love one another earnestly from the heart'. ([1 Pet. 1:22](#)) Each is to exhibit 'sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart'. ([1 Pet. 3:7](#)) Let all 'stir one another up to love and good works ... encouraging one another ... all the more' as they see the End drawing near. ([Heb. 10:24–25](#)) In short, Christians are to 'bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ': since Christ 'laid down his life for us ... we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren'. ([Gal. 6:2](#) and [1 Jn. 3:16](#)).

The last word provides us with a further clue about the nature of this care. For the most characteristic terminology used by the early Christians to describe their relationship with one another is not drawn from that of race ('kinsmen'), nation ('citizens'), employment ('colleagues'), friendship ('comrades') or even religion ('believers'), but p. 313 instead from the family. Certainly terms lifted from these other contexts are used but less frequently or more in connection with the apostolic mission than the churches

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<sup>4</sup> E. Schweizer, *Neotestamentica*, Zwingli, 1963, pp.335–336.



founded by it.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand time and time again throughout the New Testament, especially in Paul's and John's writings, it is terms drawn from family life that come before us, viz., brother, sister, father, mother, son, children and, remembering the extended character of many first-century households, also steward, servant and slave.<sup>6</sup> Such terms, especially the first group drawn from the inner family circle, are often accompanied by other personal expressions, e.g. 'my', 'our', together with terms of endearment like 'beloved'. ([Rom. 1:9](#); [Philim. 2:1](#); [Jn. 4:1](#)) All this indicates that the members of an early Christian group saw themselves as part of a close-knit family. ([Gal. 6:10](#)) This strengthened the sense of responsibility each had for the other. Since they were linked together in this way, what affected one necessarily affected all. ([1 Cor. 12–26](#)) It is not surprising that the outward mark of this bond was the giving and receiving of a kiss. ([Rom. 16:16](#); [1 Cor. 16:20](#); [1 Pet. 5:14](#)). Here the relationship between all, and the family nature of that relationship, came to tangible expression. From all this the centrality of care in early Christian community life is transparent. It is also clear that it involves not only the alleviation of others' cares but identification with them in their distress and the taking of their cares upon or into oneself.

What forms does this care take and who has responsibility for it? These questions take us to the heart of the matter and we must spend some time examining them. We shall look first at concern for *physical and material needs*.

Early Christians were very practical about this. They did not view themselves as a 'communion of souls' whose only concern was each other's 'spiritual welfare'. The bodily and material needs of members were just as much their corporate responsibility. For those living within Christian households, these needs would have been met within the family context. In the ancient world, householders were under an obligation to provide for their immediate dependants, including slaves, as well as for relatives who had been deprived of their means of support, for example widows. Within a converted household, the paterfamilias should have gained a sharpened sense of his responsibility in such matters. For 'if any one does not provide for his own relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever'. ([1 Tim. 5:8](#)) We hear echoes of this p. 314 household pattern of care in the New Testament as well. 'If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parent; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.' ([1 Tim. 5:16](#)). There is also a suggestion, however, that those who previously relied on the customary handouts of wealthier patrons for their livelihood (which brought with it an obligation to support the patron in any way he demanded), should overcome the pervasive Greek tendency to despise manual work and instead find employment so as to provide for oneself. It is probably this rather than 'eschatological laziness' that lies behind the injunction to 'work with your own hands ... so that you may command the respect of outsiders and be dependant on nobody'. ([1 Thess. 4:11](#); cf. also [2 Thess. 3:10–12](#)).

But within the Christian community there were others who did require help from those in Christian households. One of the problems at Corinth stemmed from the failure of people from such households to share the food they had brought for the Lord's Supper—which was, of course, a real meal not just a token one—with those who came empty-handed because they belonged to pagan households or no household at all.<sup>7</sup> To

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<sup>5</sup> So [Rom. 16:17](#); [Phil. 3:20](#); [1 Cor. 16:16](#); [3 Jn. 15](#); [1 Tim. 4:12](#).

<sup>6</sup> [Col. 1:1](#); [Rom. 16:1](#); [1 Cor. 4:15](#); [Rom. 16:13](#); [1 Tim. 1:2](#); [1 Jn. 5:21](#); [1 Cor. 4:1](#); [1 Cor. 3:5](#); [2 Cor. 4:5](#).

<sup>7</sup> [1 Cor. 11:20–22](#); cf. B. Winter, "The Lord's Supper at Corinth: An alternative reconstruction", *Reformed Theological Review*, 37, 1978, pp.73–82.

take another example, where there is 'a real widow ... left all alone' with no-one to provide for her, the church is to step in and look after her needs. ([1 Tim. 5:16](#)). But it is not only food which should be occasionally shared or widows who must be regularly helped. 'If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?' ([Jam. 2:16](#)) Therefore 'it is a loyal thing you do when you render any service to the brethren, especially to strangers ... you will do well to send them on their journey as befits God's service. For they have set out for his sake and have accepted nothing from the heathen ...' ([2 Jn. 5, 7](#)) Alongside such instructions, we should note the many encouragements of those with houses to exercise hospitality, of those with wealth to aid others financially and of those in the position to do so to perform helpful services of various kinds.

Yet it was not only members of, or visitors to, one's own home or community to which the early Christians had obligations. They also shared their possessions with those who were geographically far distant. Paul's gathering of funds from the Gentile churches for the poverty-stricken Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem is a singular instance of [p. 315](#) this. ([Acts 24:17](#); [Rom. 15:24-29](#); [1 Cor. 16:1-4](#)) And although it was their surplus wealth that the Gentile churches were asked to contribute, some congregations 'in ... their extreme poverty ... overflowed in a wealth of liberality', giving 'beyond their means, of their own free will.' ([2 Cor. 8:2-3](#)) We must also remember that it was not just lack of money, food, clothing and other such necessities that concerned early Christian churches. Loneliness, physical disability, and illness of members were also communal concerns. Although these could not always be removed, there were a number of different ways through which help might come. Visiting 'orphans and widows in their affliction', and those who were imprisoned and ill-treated, was one. ([Jam. 1:27](#), [Heb. 13:2](#)) Prayer for the sick accompanied by some physical gesture such as anointing with oil, raising by touch, or laying on hands, was another. ([Jam. 5:14-16](#); cf. [Acts 2:3-8](#); [9:17](#), [41](#)) Exercise of various gifts of healing also took place, as well as the occasional miraculous work, when the community contained people gifted in these respects. ([1 Cor. 12:9-10](#), [28](#); [Gal. 3-5](#)).

So in a number of ways early churches possessed the means for looking after most of the physical and material needs of their members, of friends and strangers visiting them, and of associated communities elsewhere. They were, in a very real sense, small-scale social welfare agencies and medical centres. Of them, when they were working properly, it could be said, as it was of the earlier Jerusalem church, that 'there was not a needy person amongst them'. ([Acts 4:34](#)) From this we can now move on to what we can call *personal and social care* in the wider sense.

Here we are thinking of the personal growth of the individual and social harmony of the group. These things are a major concern of all the New Testament writers and they give frequent and varied expression to it. Paul's most striking image for this is that of the body. 'For the body does not consist of one member but of many ... God arranged the organs, each of them, as he chose ... but ... so adjusted the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior part, that there may be no discord, but that the members may have the same care for one another.' ([1 Cor. 12:14, 18, 24-25](#)) Such being the case, the group should have an inbuilt bias towards helping those who are the most disadvantaged from an outward point of view. The way this takes place is through the functioning of all members of the group according to the different capacities they have been given by God. 'For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace [p. 316](#) given us, let us use them ...' ([Rom.](#)

[12:4–6](#)) The result of this way of proceeding is that ‘all attain to the unity of faith ... to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’.([Eph. 4:12](#)).

There are different ways in which they may take place, paralleling the different kinds of disharmony which might arise within the individuals or the community. For example, where severe disagreement between prominent members is the problem, they need the help of a respected third party who can persuade them to come to a common mind on the issue dividing them. ([Phil. 4:2–3](#)) If a legal dispute has arisen between two members, they should put their case before someone who has wisdom gained from a carefully sifted experience of life and can decide in the matter. ([1 Cor. 6:1–6](#)) When factions arise in the church between different groups, all are to be on the alert so as to distinguish those who are genuinely in the right from those who are being merely self-seeking.<sup>8</sup> Where differences of judgement and behaviour merely concern things on which more than one point of view is legitimate, not matters of principle, a variety of opinions and practices can flourish and it is the responsibility of those with a more mature outlook to bear with those who cannot rise to it. ([Rom. 14:1–15](#)) Should a person fall into some error in behaviour, others should gently help him to his feet again, exercising care lest they repeat his mistake. ([Gal. 6:1](#); cf. [1 Jn. 5:16](#)) In notorious cases of misbehaviour, the whole community should take action to disassociate itself from the offending person or openly call him to account. ([1 Cor. 5:1–5](#); [1 Tim. 5:19–20](#)) For the rest, all should seek to admonish those who are not pulling their weight, encourage those who feel inadequate, assist those who need help and generally show patience towards everyone. ([1 Thess. 5:14](#); cf. [1 Pet. 3:8](#); [Eph. 3:4ff](#)).

Although all should be involved in these activities, certain members of the community possessed special abilities from God equipping them to further the development of individual and group maturity. Given the close connection between teaching and pastoral care in the early church (see especially [Eph. 4:11](#))—so often it is through something said that people receive personal help and direction—those who have the gifts of prophecy, teaching, wisdom, exhortation have a real part to play here. ([1 Cor. 12:7](#), [28](#)). Then there are those described as bishops, deacons, helpers, administrators, givers of aid and so on.<sup>9</sup> It is not always clear what the functions of this second group were. Certainly they were less all-embracing than those exercised by [p. 317](#) ministers today. In every church there were several who contributed in this way, such people were not employed in any full-time capacity and to some degree all church members fulfilled the same functions. What characterised the smaller group was not any difference of status such as that between clergy and laity. No such distinction existed in these early communities. Most probably it was not only their possession of an identifiable pastoral gift. They were also special possibilities or advantages inherent in the social position they occupied. This enabled them to function in ways that others could not, especially when combined with other ancillary gifts and their own proven community concern. Such people, if and when they turned their social advantages into opportunities for service rather than occasions for privilege, gained special respect within the church and provided it with valuable assistance. ([1 Thess. 5:12](#); [Cor. 16:15–16](#); [3 Jn. 12](#)).

So in a number of different ways, and through a variety of different people, some more than others but all in some degree, these early churches were able to encourage the personal growth of their members and of the group as a whole. They were, therefore, genuinely supportive and conflict-solving communities of a quite intimate and committed kind. Their practice is well-captured in the passage from Ephesians: ‘Speaking the truth

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<sup>8</sup> [1 Cor. 11:18–19](#) cf. [1 Cor. 16:15–16](#); [1 Thess. 5:12–13](#) and contrast [2 Cor. 11:20](#); [3 Jn. 9](#).

<sup>9</sup> [Phil. 1:1](#); [1 Cor. 12:28](#); [Rom. 12:8](#) and also [1 Tim. 3:1](#); [Tit. 1:7](#).

to one another in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together ... when every part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.' ([Eph. 4:15-16](#)).

## NEW PATTERNS OF CARING

Does the pattern of care in these communities have anything to teach us about our approach to social work today? Before answering this, a prior question should be raised. What did the early Christian approach introduce into traditional patterns of care in the ancient world? Investigating this might isolate some distinctive aspects which will help us with our main concern.

The exercise of charity, and rendering of aid, were part and parcel of both Jewish and Hellenistic society.<sup>10</sup> Quite apart from the regular public donations from imperial or religious treasuries, and occasional private gifts by well-endowed persons to their dependants, the principle of mutual financial support lay at the heart of club life in the [p. 318](#) ancient world. The first-century abounded with voluntary associations of all kinds, much as clubs exist today to satisfy a wide variety of interests. Many were formed as burial societies to ensure a respectable department from this life for their members. Some also aided members distressed by other circumstances. Through their common meals they catered for people's social needs. They also provided a reference point for people's search for identity, especially since a number of them admitted women, foreigners and slaves or were established purely by such groups. But within them all the principle of mutual financial, personal and social support was a carefully regulated affair and kept within strictly calculated limits. In this respect it mirrored the practice of philanthropy at this time in general. This worked on the principle of reciprocal return: those who gave expected something in response, loyalty perhaps, or assistance in their various causes. If other motives sometimes surfaced, e.g. the expectation of official honour being awarded to the donor, they also derived from the same principle. Even where gifts were distributed without anything being expected in return, it was on a virtually *quid pro quo* basis, with the most worthy of the recipients gaining all or most of the charity dispensed.

In Jewish circles, the reciprocal note was only minimally present.<sup>11</sup> For the most part the donor gave physical and social aid because he had received the same freely from God's own hands. Historically, this was grounded in the Sinai covenant, with its basis in the release from bondage in Egypt and its goal the formation of a new nation in the Promised Land. Contemporaneously, the members of the covenant continued to receive all good things from God and enjoyed as well the fellowship of synagogue life and religious brotherhood. In some groups, such as Qumran, this involved care for every aspect of the individual's life, though only by withdrawing him completely from normal society and placing him within a strictly gradated, hierarchial community. In others, such as the Pharisaic schools, ideas of reciprocity sometimes seem to have reasserted themselves, through the quest for public acknowledgement by others or private acknowledgement by God for their generosity. In the synagogue, a concern for more than just religious obligations was involved, as is evidenced by the educational, charitable and hospitality structures connected with it. Yet not everyone received the same attention; e.g. women, migrants and slaves suffered at the expense of men, native-born and male children. [p. 319](#)

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<sup>10</sup> A. R. Hands, *Charities & Social Aid in Greece and Rome*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> J. Jeremios, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, London, SCM, 1969, pp.111-119, pp.126-134.

Christianity introduced novel elements into all this at the level of motive, objects, character and scope, even though its approach was built on essentially Jewish foundations and was expressed occasionally in Hellenistic terms.<sup>12</sup> In the first place, no longer was insistence upon reciprocity or desire for acknowledgement the motor behind charitable giving and social aid. It sprang purely from personal and communal gratitude for the experience of God's salvation in Christ. ([2 Cor. 8:9ff.](#)) In doing so, it did not demand a response from the recipient, however much it might long for a like-minded spirit to develop in his heart. In the second place, such generosity was not directly ostentatiously to the most worthy but in an unobtrusive way given indiscriminately to all. For God's redemptive kindness was not embraced by many 'wise', or 'powerful' or of 'noble birth', and in his providential ordering of the world 'he makes the sun to rise on the evil and good, and sends rain on the just and unjust'.<sup>13</sup> Indeed in the community it is specifically those who have least to offer that are to be treated with the greatest honour and humble service should mark the character of the giver. ([1 Cor. 12:23](#)). In the third place, this exercise of care is not at all a stringently regulated affair or one that is kept within certain calculated limits. It exhibits strong sacrificial tendencies, involves the whole person in rendering service not just his resources and entails a real exposure of himself, and cost to himself, on the part of the giver.<sup>14</sup> Finally, it is every aspect of another's life, which comes in for concern. This includes their physical and material, personal and social welfare, as we have seen. But their growth in understanding and discernment—through the gifts of prophecy, teaching, wisdom etc. already mentioned—and even ministry to the subconscious aspects of their personality—witness the gifts of glossolalia and singing in the spirit—are also encompassed. ([1 Cor. 12:10](#); [14:1-5](#), [30](#)).

Clearly, then, the appearance of the early churches inserted something new into the patterns of care that were in existence in the first century. The whole approach to social welfare that has developed in the West, and more recently in the East as well, is debtor to this Christian contribution and has been profoundly influenced by it. Does anything remain from which we can still learn of have we absorbed all the early church has to offer?

p. 320

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK TODAY

We can still gain and in three different ways viz., through today's churches recapturing in their meetings enduring elements of the early Christian approach that they have neglected, compromised or formalised; through facets of the early Christian approach, in suitably modified form, providing the model upon which ancilliary Christian organisations and separate secular structures are initiated or altered; through underlying principles of care in the early Christian approach transforming assumptions often found in social work today. We shall look at each of these in turn.

(1) When functioning properly, a church is intended to promote genuine care by the members for one another. This covers all aspects of their life. People's bodily and material needs, along with their personal and social welfare, are comprehensively catered for. This does not mean that all such needs will be met in this way. There may be exceptional circumstances or difficulties which require help from specialist agencies or skilled personnel. But many of the problems with which social workers frequently have to deal

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<sup>12</sup> See, inter alia, K. Nickle, *The Collection*, London, SCM, 1966.

<sup>13</sup> [1 Cor. 1:26](#) and [Matt. 5:46](#). See also [Mk. 2:17](#); [Rom. 5:6](#); [2 Cor. 5:14-16](#); [1 Cor. 12:23](#).

<sup>14</sup> So respectively [2 Cor. 2:3-4](#); [1 Thess. 2:8](#) and [2 Cor. 4:5-12](#).



should never arise in such a community. Paul once upbraided the Corinthian Christians for taking legal disputes between members to court, instead of searching out people from their own group who could judge them. By analogy, there are many situations ordinarily requiring trained social assistance which Christians should be able to handle in their own churches. There are two sides to this. The reality of Christian community life should prevent many ordinary social problems arising. It should also support people in such a way that they can cope with more serious difficulties, e.g., those arising from bereavement, desertion, divorce, unemployment, retardation and so on. In writing this, I am thinking of a number of groups with which I have been involved. Over the years these have warmly embraced within their membership, and substantially aided with their problems, younger and older persons who are mentally or socially retarded, men and women with young children deserted by or divorced from, their spouses, the recently widowed, unemployed and expelled from home, people with homosexual problems and so on. What's more, most of these groups have done this with scarcely any benefit of clergy or other specialised help, simply as ordinary people helping others to discover what it means to be part of a Christian family.

The problem is that this so seldom happens and that churches have developed structures and attitudes that hinder its taking place. The concentration of local church activities around a large central service, p. 321 generally formal in character, and around other intermediate-sized organisations defined according to age, sex and interest, means that the possibility of small, enduring inter-generational and sexually-mixed groups, in which the members are fully committed to each other's welfare and openly sharing their abilities with one another, either does not exist or is low down the scale of priorities. The early Christians certainly met in larger groups as well as in these smaller gatherings, but their life was centred on the smaller gatherings with the larger meetings growing out of them rather than the other way round. Intermediate-sized organisations scarcely existed for, on the whole, what these achieve today was achieved within the smaller and larger gathering, or through the everyday activities of Christians in their society whether as individuals or in co-operation with others. The related problem in churches today stems from the influence of attitudes derived from the Anglo-Saxon cultural ethos, according to which private matters are not the concern of others, not even one's fellow Christians, or stemming from the Pietist-Evangelical outlook, which encourages openness at the so-called 'spiritual' level, but not in other aspects of one's life, leads to a contraction in Christians' vision of community life and in the responsibility they take for one another. This failure of the church to be the church actually contributes to the present demand for expanded social services. In some cases, where church life is particularly legalistic, divisive or poverty-stricken it even generates problems in people who did not previously possess them. The proper fulfilment of the church's role, on the other hand, would for one group in society at least substantially to decrease the call upon social welfare agencies. Insofar as Christians belonging to such a community become socially more helpful to people outside as well as to those inside the group, these effects would also take place among other sectors of the population as well.

(2) The early Christian understanding of care has a contribution outside the local Christian community in another way as well. The principles enshrined in it, suitably modified to fit different frameworks and cast in a secular rather than religious key, can be implemented in the everyday world of business and leisure. That is, they can be formulated in ways which provide models for the establishment or revitalisation of other institutions in society. Although such associations would have their own particular objects, such as the production and sale of goods, or the provision of leisure facilities, the incorporation of features drawn from early church life would result in other more basic

needs of their members being met indirectly. Co-operatives for one purpose or another are a good example of this. Here all the members [p. 322](#) can participate in formulating the association's ground rules, in making decisions affecting important aspects of its operation, in the actual running of its day-to-day business. Here too limits can be set to its size so that the personal dimension is retained and constraints placed on its aspirations so that it reflects the actual skills and interests of its members rather than the search for maximum profit, on the one hand, or competitive glory, on the other.

My confidence in the practicability and value of such a way of proceeding rests not just on a conviction that principles of early church life can have this kind of secondary application but on the knowledge of groups which do function in this way. I am thinking particularly of a local co-operative craft shop, numbering some sixty members, which was consciously set up on modified 'early church' principles. All voluntarily share in the production and evaluation of items for sale, in decisions about policy and the association's daily operations, in manning the shop they have rented and other outside exhibitions. The co-operative aims at providing an outlet for its members' skills and a community within which they can develop their craft. Any profit made by the shop is given to charity and the size of the association is restricted so that unnecessary duplication of interests or overproduction of items is avoided. The point I wish to make about this is not that the endeavour has been successful—itsself quite an achievement in our increasingly large-scale financial and profit-maximising business world—but rather the way it has drawn many women, and some men, out of their previous suburbia-induced neurotic or retirement-induced aimless existence. A number have commented on the fact that they no longer need to reach for the valium tablets or call on professional help to cope with loss of personal identity or loneliness. Through the association they have established genuine relationships with others and developed a greater sense of their own self-worth and abilities. They have also practically helped those members going through various severe strains. Indirectly, therefore, the co-operative has made quite a significant contribution to the lives of many of its members at all the levels about which we have been talking.

(3) The principles of early church life also have something to say to the conduct of social work itself. What follows is far from an exhaustive list of principles of early Christian community life which might be applicable to some aspect or other of social work today. Nor can I discuss in detail how such principles might find specific contemporary expression. I would simply like to identify three starting-points for a reconsideration of some of the assumptions involved in much, though by no means all, social work. [p. 323](#)

(a) Let me begin first, however, with the attitude of the person involved in social work before going on to matters of a more structural kind. One of the chief dangers inherent in acting as a full-time helper of other people lies in the development of a helper/helped distinction in one's outlook, one that tends to take hold unconsciously rather than by deliberate choice. No such rigid distinction existed in early Christian communities, even in the minds of leading figures like Paul. For while he viewed himself as a helper of others, he also saw himself as one helped by others as well, indeed by the self-same group he came to assist. His projection of a visit to a group he had not stayed with before is characteristically couched in terms of the mutual benefit each will receive, despite the special wide-ranging abilities he possesses. (cf. [Rom. 1:11–12](#)) And it was not only from the more knowledgeable or eminent people in the community that he experienced help but also from apparently insignificant and disadvantaged persons as well.<sup>15</sup> There is nothing so psychologically harmful to the individual who is in a position to give, or

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<sup>15</sup> So, on the one hand, [Rom. 16:2](#); [1 Cor. 15:17ff](#) and, on the other, [Rom. 16:13](#) and [Phlmn. 8ff](#).

psychologically detrimental to the individual in need as an assumption by the first of a 'I am the helper, you are the helped' mentality. We are all in need of one sort or another and we can all derive help from others—however needy they themselves may be—when we are in touch with them. The adoption of a one-sided attitude is all the worse when it is done in a superior or patronising manner rather than with a genuine, not manipulative, servant or ministering attitude that alone conforms to the example of Christ. ([Mk. 10:45](#)) Yet there are aspects of the way in which social welfare is presently expressed that still tends to encourage such attitudes.

(b) This leads on to a broader problem, that is, the increasing professionalisation and institutionalisation of care in modern society. We have all been warned by Ivan Illich of the way in which the dominance of the 'medical' profession has led to the 'expropriation' rather than improvement of the community's health.<sup>16</sup> A pervasive mystique surrounds the professionally-trained doctor and the technologically sophisticated hospital. People become afraid of dealing with their minor physical or psychological complaints and increasingly see the doctor, or psychologist, as the only ones qualified to handle their personal problems, and the hospital as the only place where more extensive treatment can be carried out. Meanwhile health care [p. 324](#) becomes a more and more expensive, political and impersonal affair. The decentralisation of medical knowledge and skills through equipping other than medical people and institutions to deal with a whole range of usual complaints, and more particularly, the instruction of ordinary men and women in the basics of health care, would do much to alleviate present problems. Other things that need to be done include dispelling the mystique that surrounds illness and health as well as the false expectations that many people have about them. This would involve nothing less than a revolution in professional attitudes but it is one for which an analogy lies in the pattern of care inherent in the early Christian communities. (Insofar as the church itself, and the ministerial vocation, have become over-professionalised and over-institutionalised they too need to learn from the New Testament in these respects). Social work has not travelled as far as this along the road of full professionalisation and institutionalisation as certain other groups and structures in society. Amongst other things it still draws on the assistance of people who have not had formal training and much of the work is done in the homes of those in need of help. But even this latter group are in danger of becoming professionalised at a lower level and tendencies in the direction of fuller institutionalisation are increasing all the time.

(c) There is a third respect in which early church practice is relevant today. Among social workers there is a growing realisation of the contribution that a disadvantaged group, from its own resources, can make to the welfare of the individuals who constitute it. Yet all too often the individual is still singled out from others who are in the same position and dealt with in comparative isolation from them. This can happen even when those in need require the same, or a related, kind of help and live in reasonable proximity, to one another. A much more fruitful way of approaching people whose needs are experienced by others within a reasonable distance begins by encouraging such people to meet up with those nearby who have like problems. Then, with the social worker acting as a resource person rather than leader, the group should be left to discover how best it can educate itself about the shared problem, resolve what to do about it and take practical steps to have it settled. As all this takes place, not only do the various gifts necessary for the group's proper functioning become apparent but the problem (and sometimes others as well) begins to be solved in the actual process of such people corporately seeking to

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<sup>16</sup> I. Illich *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, Marion Boyars, 1976. cf. also his essay in *Disabling Professions*, London, Marion Boyars, 1977.

resolve it. An attempt to do this is described in M. Liffman's book, *Power for the People: The Family Centre Project. An experiment in self-help*.<sup>17</sup> The eventual demise of this example should not deter others from further experiments along this line.<sup>18</sup>

## REDIRECTION IN THEOLOGICAL METHOD

As I indicated earlier, these are simply three starting-points for a reconsideration of some of the assumptions present in social work today. There are *other aspects* of Christian community life which could be investigated for their relevance here. In particular there is also the need for *specific applications* of such principles to existing problems and possibilities. If this is to be undertaken effectively however, some sort of redirection in theological method must first take place. Not just a revaluation of social work itself, Traditional ways of relating the Bible to the modern world are not fully adequate.

In the first place the work cannot be done by the theologian wrestling with the Bible alone. It must become a corporate activity which includes people directly engaged in social work, as well as others who have a stake in the field. These others may come from disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, whose perspective throws light on the context in which social work is done or the factors involved in its exercise. Some may also come from among those who are on the receiving end of professional care, who, in one sense, have most to gain or lose from the way it is conducted. Representatives from such groups are needed because only they can provide the concrete knowledge and experience which enables the word to take flesh and not just remain at the level of abstract theory or general principles. Unfortunately we are not yet very accustomed to think of Christian reflection in these terms and even if we do so there is still more that is needed.

In the second place, this cannot be done by simply working out-wards from the Bible alone (or from psychology and sociology) with certain general problems in view. This is the usual way in which such endeavours have been carried out: from exegesis of the text, if a biblical source is in use (or from interpretation of a method if some other discipline is the starting point) through exposition of its meaning, to application to the present. Yet such work has not always been done along these lines. Paul, for example, often began at the other end. Taking his cue from various specific problems which had arisen in his communities, some of them quite local, even at times individual in character, he worked back to that aspect of the gospel which could illuminate the matter, and then went on to outline general principles of action. The final step was to make some specific recommendations. The increasing subtlety of his thinking, and its ever practical cast, owed much to this way of coming at things. It forced him to examine the gospel from ever new angles and to make concrete proposals for people to act on. In the area we're concerned with here, much could be gained from following his approach. To some extent this is already done so far as pastoral problems are concerned through papers prepared to meet issues arising in local churches at the denominational level, or through the adoption of a case-study method approach in theological colleges. But a wrestling with the less ecclesiastical or doctrinal matters that arise in local churches needs to be undertaken as well.

In the third place, we need not just theologians, social workers and others who will pool their resources in these ways. We desperately need a few who embody the concerns

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<sup>17</sup> M. Liffman, *Power for the People: The Family Centre Project. An experiment in self-help*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> See further C. Froland, 'Formal and Informal Care: Discontinuities in a Continuum', *Social Service Review*, Dec. 1980, pp.572-587.

and abilities of all three within themselves, i.e., people who are at one and the same time theologically perceptive, seriously engaged in the care of others, and alert to the psychological and sociological dimensions of their work and its actual effects upon its recipients. Here again, Paul provides the model. He was not a systematic dogmatist but an active pastoral thinker, one who was neither unaware of the broader social currents of his time nor isolated from the personal ministry of others involved in similar work to his own. Surely, for all the cultural differences between his time and ours, this is partly why he continues to speak so relevantly to us. There is a theological sharpness, realistic edge and experiential flavour to his injunctions that has the ring of authenticity about it.

Only if Christian reflection upon social work is governed by these considerations will its desired practical application be discovered, with all its challenge and complexity. Since this is the only way we will find the answers to our questions in this area, the *most essential and practical* thing that can be done at the present is the setting up of groups to work in just such a way as I have here suggested and, along with that, the questioning by some people as to whether they are being called to the kind of theological vocation of which I have spoken. Any attempt to short-circuit this way of approach will be doomed to superficiality.

So then, the early Christian communities did have a distinctive approach to care in their own time and, for all the influence that has had in twenty centuries since, their contribution today is by no means exhausted. For this to be released, however, a redirection of theological [p. 327](#) endeavour as well as a reorientation of patterns of care are required. Only so will social work itself feel the full impact of that revolutionary new life that Christ, through the early communities, introduced into the world at large.

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**Dr. Robert Banks lives in Canberra, Australia. His doctoral thesis is published as *Paul's Idea of Community* (Paternoster Press). [p. 328](#)**

## **Biblical Ethics in a Fallen World**

**John Ting**

*Reprinted from Asian Challenge, with permission.*

*This article raises important questions concerning the responsibility of the local church whose members lose their jobs because they act on biblical absolutes in situations which demand ethical choices.*

(Editor)

I was chatting with William about a series on Christian Work Ethics which I had been giving. In the course of our conversation he made a remark which provoked considerable reflection on my part. 'You do know, don't you John, that you are regarded as a 'purist' in this area of ethics? ...' I gathered people meant by this that I was an 'armchair' idealist, correct in theory but impractical in practice. For example a group of typists/receptionists told me that lying is part and parcel of their job—they claimed loyalty to their boss required this. I found it hard to accept this though I trust I had every sympathy for their



situation and some appreciation of the pressure which confronts every Christian in a fallen world. I found it hard to accept that there was no real alternative but to follow these norms of society. It went against all that I believed and taught (and attempted to practise) regarding Biblical ethics and standards as normative, relevant and practicable for present day society—fallen thought it is.<sup>1</sup>

So in this article I want to address myself to this question of whether Biblical ethics are too idealistic and impracticable for our (fallen) society. Would I be forced to modify my stand if I were to move out of my ‘ivory tower’ classroom and academic seminars into the real world?<sup>2</sup>

## HOW GRAY IS GRAY?

I have noticed we find it easy to use the phrase ‘gray areas’ whenever we talk about the application of Biblical ethics to the real world situation. But how gray gray is, is partly conditioned by the perspective from which we view the area concerned. To people inside a darkened theatre whose eyes have adjusted to the lack of light the theatre may appear relatively light but to someone who has just come in from the light of day outside the theatre may appear pitch black. I am not **P. 329** denying that there are gray areas where it would be presumptuous to prescribe a cut and dried solution and I am aware that the problem may be heightened when the Bible has no specific word to say leaving us with the difficult responsibility of determining the relevant principles that bear upon that situation. But I am saying that if we were more thoroughly grounded on Scriptures and less conditioned by the world views around us we would see some ‘gray’ areas for what they really are—not gray but black.

One of the important factors which contributed to the expansion of the church in the early centuries was the seriousness and consistency with which the early Christians sought to apply the Biblical ethic in a thoroughly pragmatic society. Christians took their religion seriously. They were prepared to die for their faith—a rather unique phenomenon at a time when most men used religion to serve their own ends. The Christians were prepared to live out their faith at all costs. Theirs was a seriousness which spread to every facet of life. Their society was not different from ours. If anything, it was harder to be a consistent Christian then than now.

## SAME PRINCIPLES—DIFFERENT APPLICATIONS

We need to make due allowances for the differences between cultures. For one thing the same word may connote different meanings and practices in different societies. Take the example of bribery. When I first returned to Singapore and taught ethics I took a ‘black and white’ stand on bribery. I had very little sympathy for a Christian who took to bribes to expedite matters. For the Bible clearly and specifically condemns the giving of gifts to judges to subvert their judgement. The basic principle would seem to apply to all other areas too. So I concluded that bribes of any kind were absolutely out! Later, on reflection and in conversation, I realised my stand may have been conditioned as much by my cultural experience as by Scripture. Australia and Singapore where I lived, were relatively free from corruption. But what about those surrounding countries where ‘bribery’ is

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<sup>1</sup> See my article, Social Concern, *Asian Challenge*, June 75.

<sup>2</sup> I did have five years of teaching in a government secondary school. However, some may regard teaching as a rather ‘protected’ occupation.

almost part of the fabric of society, where the 'bribe' resembles a 'commission' or a 'tip' i.e. almost like a service charge? In such cases we are not really subverting judgement in our favour for the 'bribe' is imposed on everyone, much like the 10% service charge that is automatically added to our hotel bill.<sup>3</sup> The governments concerned are well aware of the practice and appear to condone it. The amount P. 330 needed is common knowledge and I understand in some areas a receipt may even be issued for the 'bribe'. I find I am now more sympathetic to Christians who feel they need to go along with such a system though I am still personally inclined to an absolutist view. But the point is, bribery is one thing in Singapore and apparently another thing in Indonesia or India.

Furthermore, we may fail to make sufficient allowance for the different social conditions and political climate which exist between countries.

For example, those of us brought up in a western democracy would consider the practice of detention without trial a grave immoral practice and we may even wonder why our Christian counterparts in the 'guilty' countries don't raise their voice in protest. Let me answer with extracts from two students' assignments:-

1. An increasingly important issue in most Asian countries is the detention of political dissidents or 'social menace' without trial. In Malaysia some political detainees have been (and still are) in prisons from as far back as the early 60's. I do not intend to formulate the ethics of such actions but rather to raise certain issues which might help a western Christian friend rethink his position before outrightly condemning the whole system. (a) Freedom of speech is not necessarily good for all societies. In Asia where a large percentage of the population is uneducated the minority that is educated and has the experience of rationalising certain ideology for society must do so with the utmost responsibility. Masses that are not trained to think for themselves but who would emotionally follow their leaders can be used for evil gains through their manipulation by a wicked few. Hence total freedom of speech can be a hindrance to society rather than a help. The bloodiest racial war in Malaysia was a result of such phenomena. (b) Potentially violent men or men who have vowed to carry out bloody revolution must be confined and controlled. Often due to lack of facilities, technology, communication and funds, a delay in confining such people through the normal judicial system would by itself secure their release—hence detention for a limited period without trial is necessary.

As a Christian I can understand the spirit of such a rationale but I have (strict) reservations as the method is open to more abuse than help. However, I have no better alternatives besides the preventive measure ...

2. There is a difference of heaven and earth between the West and my country. In no way can we compare them on equal lines.

Within the period of thirty two years, the country has hardly p. 331 breathed under established civil government. Several times, there have been shifts from civil to martial law. There are several factors: (1) Education—This is one of the major reasons. People are illiterate; they do not have understanding to discern the right people or policies. Therefore they often go by slogans. So sometimes the wrong type of people try to play with people's opinion and create trouble for the government. (2) Social and economic factors—As is often said, poverty is a curse. Under such circumstances, people want to follow happy slogans. (3) Religion—This is another most effective tool used by the political leader. The majority is extremely religious-minded therefore leaders can use their religious zeal and emotion and create trouble. Take for example, the present issue, the burning down of the US Embassy and the killing of seven people. The wrong people

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<sup>3</sup> In the Bible, the greater condemnation seems to be levelled against those who exploit their power to demand bribes than those who give under pressure.

have played with the emotions of the people. On such an occasion what should the government do? Are open trials for such people useful for the country? Will it be helpful to the community?

Should we think about only a few people or about the majority and the country at large?

My personal opinion is that if the Government for some time keeps them in prison even without trial, I will sympathise with the government. Why? Because it will deter further exploitation of the situation till things become normal. Because this open trial means inviting further trouble, people will again come out in the streets and there may be more damage.

## **CHRISTIAN ETHICS NEED A BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW**

On one occasion while lecturing along the lines outlined in the first section above, I was perturbed by the ‘resistance’ to what I was presenting. People felt the position I presented was too idealistic an approach for our fallen world—an ethic for heaven perhaps but not a practical enough ethic for earth! I wondered why there should be such ‘resistance’ among Bible-believing Christians. I believe it has to do with out inadequate world-views. A Biblical ethic is only consonant with a Biblical world view. A feeling of dissonance results when we impose a Biblical ethic against the background of a non-Biblical world view.<sup>4</sup>

Let me clarify what I mean by the importance of a Biblical world view for our ethics:

1. A Biblical world view consists of more than just a knowledge of p. 332 Biblical morality, that is, rights and wrongs, commandments and prohibitions, the principles which underlie the oughts and ought nots etc.

2. A Biblical world view relevant to Biblical morality should include the following:

- a. God is a loving Father. He is not a tyrant nor a ‘hanging judge’, out to punish us the moment we transgress. We may recall the older traditional attitude of the Asian father. If a child did everything right the father gave no smile nor word of praise or commendation but if the child transgressed in any way the heavy hand would descend. God is not like this. He is a loving Father vitally concerned with the welfare of His children.

When we talk about the absoluteness of Biblical morality we are not talking about a cold-blooded stern set of rules in isolation or in vacuo. We are talking about the way of life—the instructions and the commandments—of a loving, caring Father.

- b. God is the Sovereign, Living God who intervenes on behalf of His children. Christians have often been accused of being too idealistic and unrealistic. They have been accused of not taking into sufficient account all the relevant factors within a situation. But the reverse is the case for we are being unrealistic if we leave the Living God out of our reckoning. Whether we leave this factor out or not may vitally influence our approach to ethical decision making. It is not that Christians are too heavenly minded but that non-Christians do not have before them the total picture.

I wonder if Christians have been unduly, albeit unconsciously, influenced by the view of God held by our non-Christian society—the Hindu Non-personal deity, the Buddhist Nirvana, the fatalism bred by the Islamic concept of God, the capricious demons and spirits of the popular animism which underlies a considerable section of

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<sup>4</sup> For example, if the whole orchestra is playing in a minor key and someone strikes up a note in a major key dissonance will result.

Asian society or Hinduism or the Deism of the western society. The non-Christian deities by and large do not take the initiative to intervene on behalf of their followers.

Given this kind of background and influence, it is not surprising that even Christians leave God out of the **real** reckoning.

Perhaps we have been so conditioned by these prevailing perspectives in our society that we do not take into account the Personal Living Sovereign Caring God of the Bible. When we are talking about an absolute Biblical morality we are not talking about it in vacuo, but in the context of the living God of the Bible.

- c. A Biblical world view also includes a proper understanding of Eschatology. Whether this world and this life are all there is or whether there is an after-life of eternal significance has an important bearing upon our ethics. The Bible speaks of this life as important but nevertheless as of transitory character. We are aliens and pilgrims. If our real home is in heaven then we should be able to sit somewhat 'loosely' to this world with 'our affections set above where Christ is ...'

Think of a diplomat sent to another country for a term of office. His loyalty is to his home country and it is this loyalty which basically determines his [p. 333](#) lifestyle though naturally he will seek to adjust as much as he is able to in the country of residence. He will not let his roots sink too deeply knowing it is a temporary residence. It has been said that some Christians make themselves so much at home in this world that when they get to heaven they will feel homesick!

- d. A Biblical world view further involves a proper understanding of God as Creator. As our Creator/Maker He is in the best position to know how we will best function. I understand the Bible to contain the Maker's instructions.

## BIBLICAL ETHICS ARE COMMUNITY ETHICS

It may not be easy to conform to Biblical standards in our fallen world and if a member of the community suffers in doing so, the community needs to support him. The Christian community is responsible to bear the consequences of its teaching. It should not just make pronouncements which lay standards upon the individual without also providing a supportive ministry for that individual. This was the failure of the Pharisees and it received its due censure from our Lord.

The importance of this need to see the church as a Body concerned for the welfare and needs of its members has struck me with renewed impact in recent months. At a series I gave on work ethics I was exhorting people to be honest, act with integrity and speak truthfully in their work situation. A group of receptionists came to me advocating the necessity of 'white' lies as part and parcel of their job ... it was impracticable to adopt a 'purist' stand—their job might be at stake ...! Now one cannot deny the possibility of suffering following adherence to Biblical standards in our fallen world, the receptionist **may** lose her job for refusing to lie; the junior executive **may** have his promotion delayed because he doesn't engage in politicking; sales may slacken because the salesman speaks with integrity. So one's income **may** remain static and one may face hardship along with one's family. What is to be done?

Firstly we need to have a proper perspective of values. I recall one young man who turned down a job opportunity which promised substantial increases in material benefits because the job also entailed a great deal of 'entertainment' of a less than edifying kind. It may have been a loss materially but it was a gain in real terms.

The second is to recognise that Biblical ethics are community ethics. This was impressed upon me when I gave some lectures on Biblical ethics in Malaysia. I had been speaking about the absoluteness of Biblical morality and in particular the need for

honesty and integrity in our business dealings. A Christian leader there encouraged me to continue along these lines in my lectures. However, he also reminded me that [p. 334](#) my lectures were not a mere academic exercise for they were having their effect upon the lives of some. He then told me about one of the Christians, a girl who had just been baptised the previous Sunday. She was employed as a sales assistant in a local cosmetics store. She now found herself in a dilemma. She knew that her customers were not getting the full value of the product. The products had either been diluted or partly emptied out elsewhere. Her boss had made it plain that she was not to let the customers know this or she would lose her job! She was not well educated and would have had difficulty in finding an alternative job. She brought this problem to the Christian leader who left the decision with her but told her that if she decided to be honest and suffered as a result then the Church would bear the consequences with and for her!

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**John Ting teaches at Discipleship Training Centre, Singapore. [p. 335](#)**

## **Book Reviews**

### **FAITH AND CHURCH**

Donald Guthrie, [New Testament Theology](#)

Reviewed by David H. Wheaton and D. A. Carson

### **THEOLOGY AND CULTURE**

Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (eds.), [Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World](#)

Reviewed by Sunand Sumithra

### **MISSION AND EVANGELISM**

Peter Beyerhaus and U. Betz (eds.), [Oekume im Spiegel Von Nairobi '75: Durch die Wueste zur Weltenheit](#)

Reviewed by E. H., translated by Sunand Sumithra

### **ETHICS AND SOCIETY**

Bob Goudzward, [Capitalism and Progress: A diagnosis of Western Society](#)

Reviewed by Brian Griffiths

### **PASTORAL MINISTRY**

John R. W. Stott, [Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century](#)

Reviewed by Sunand Sumithra

### **AGENDA FOR RENEWAL**



# Faith and Church

## NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

by Donald Guthrie

(IVP 1981) pp. 1064, Price £14.95 or U.S. \$24.95

Summary of reviews by David H. Wheaton in *Churchman*, No. 3, 1982 and D. A. Carson in *TSF Bulletin*, March/April 1982.

Donald Guthrie is a well-known New Testament scholar who has written the standard text-book, *New Testament Introduction* as well as competent commentaries on Galatians and the Pastoral Epistles, and several other books. This major work *New Testament Theology*, both the reviewers agree, will also become a standard book. The aim of the book, is 'to bring out the rich variety of NT thought, but ... also to demonstrate in a substantial way the unity of NT thought'. (p.59).

Doctor Guthrie rejects the methodology of Bultmann after a careful examination of his presuppositions, and argues that, instead of needing reinterpretation in every age, NT theology is authoritative and normative (not descriptive). In fact, this is the major innovation in this volume. Most NT theologies such as those by Bultmann, Ladd, Kummel etc., outline and explain the principal theological themes of each corpus of NT literature (such as Pauline writings, Johannine literature etc). But Guthrie deals with NT teaching as a whole on several themes, namely God, man and his world, christology, the mission of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, the future, the NT approach to ethics and the scriptures. Each subject is systematically treated with an analogy of the teaching under view in different corpuses, such as synoptics, John, Acts, Pauline, Hebrews and the rest of the NT. Carson finds two disadvantages in this method; first, it provides no form for discussing the consistent elements of NT theology as parts of the whole; second, even when different parts of the NT deal with the same theme (e.g. 'Kingdom of God') the standard organization does not provide for comparison of treatments, still less for attempts at synthesis. This also means that the particular NT corpuses discussed vary from topic to topic and hence the choice becomes selective. Another strength of the book is that the first two essays give a lengthy discussion on the nature, definition, background, limitation and structure of New Testament theology, and the closing chapter on Scripture concludes: 'Since the testimony of the NT is backed by an authoritative and inspired text, its teaching must have more than a [p. 337](#) descriptive function, and must form the basis of the doctrinal position of the ongoing Christian church.' (p.982).

*New Testament Theology* is a text book, and is such it is not designed to make a lot of telling advances, but conveniently and courteously sifts a copious quantity of discussion and presents it in digestible format. Dr. Guthrie has just retired from his teaching work, and it is hoped that in the next few years he will produce more of the fruits of a lifetime of scholarship and teaching. We heartily recommend this book to any serious student of the Bible as a must.

# Theology and Culture

## SHARING JESUS IN THE TWO-THIRDS WORLD

*edited by* Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden

(PIM-Asia, Bangalore, 1983), pp.419, US \$12, or £7–50% discount for two-thirds world nations.

Reviewed by Sunand Sumithra

Twenty-five ‘established and emerging’ theologians from twenty-one nations met in Bangkok March 22nd to 25th, 1982 to answer the basic question of the conference, ‘What does it mean to proclaim Jesus Christ, to be forgiven by him and to confess him in our various contexts?’ The book is a collection of 14 papers presented at the conference plus an introduction and an epilogue by the editors and the findings report. No attempt was made to produce an agreed statement. The result is that not only do the length of the papers vary but also the quality and the content. The papers deal with issues such as sociological and cultural analyses, contextualization, inter-religious dialogues, syncretism and descriptions of certain religious traditions, but what is lacking is a serious exegetical or church-historical basis for the questions of the conferences.

Orlando E. Costas states in his keynote address that the origin of the conference goes back to COWE, Pattaya Consultation, 1980. Costas defined for the conference the two contexts in which the proclaiming of Jesus Christ is to be carried out, namely, the context of the poor, the powerless and the oppressed and the context of non-Christians and their worldviews. He defines the new meaning—content of the term ‘two thirds world’, as the oppressed people that live in *all* the countries of the world. The book rightly highlights the three crucial issues of [p. 338](#) missions in our time; christology, religious pluralism and global social injustice. In interpreting the universality of Christ in terms of human solidarity, some of the papers tend towards the concept of a cosmic Christ. In its positive approach to religions the book accepts Jerusalem 1928, but rejects Tambaran 1938. There is an openness to synthesis and perhaps syncretism. Unfortunately the question of inter-religious dialogue is dealt with in a superficial way—there is no mention of the deeper issues such as *epoche*, openness, commitment and the question of revelation. In its attempt to make the Gospel relevant to the socio-economic context of our times there is a tendency for theology to become ideology. The book suggests that the agenda of the world determines the church’s mission. Despite this the conference claims to be committed to ‘the uniqueness and pre-existence, lordship, resurrection, atoning death and the second coming of Jesus Christ’. The title ‘sharing Jesus’ is significant and one wonders if the Gospel is being limited to ‘the two-thirds world’. The book is well edited, the format is good and the addition of the editors’ synopses and discussions with the authors at the end of each paper are often helpful. Original Greek and Urdu scripts, bibliography and diagrams add to the variety of the book. The 50% discount to the two-thirds world is attractive. This reviewer endorses John Stott’s measured review of the conference: ‘we need to listen respectfully to them, so that we will undoubtedly be enriched in the process because they raise crucial issues relevant to our times’.

# Mission and Evangelism

## **OEKUME IM SPIEGEL VON NAIROBI '75: DURCH DIE WUESTE ZUR WELTEINHEIT**

*edited by Peter Beyerhaus and U. Betz.*  
(Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission)

Abstract of a review by E. H. in *Fundamentum* No. 4. 1982, translated by Sunand Sumithra.

In the year in which the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches has taken place it may be anachronistic to recommend a book on the Fifth Assembly at Nairobi (1975); but in order to understand a movement, a study of its history is necessary. This book is an essential part of such an understanding of the history of the conciliar ecumenical movement. [p. 339](#)

The book is a collection of articles by fifteen different authors who unveil the logistics of the Assembly, the key ideas, the work of the several groups. The reviewer recommends particularly the following articles in the book; the opening article by Dr. Byang Kato, on the theme of the Assembly: *Jesus Christ Frees and Unites*; 'Leading ideas in the main papers of the assembly', 'the final results of Nairobi', by Peter Beyerhaus; 'the significance of the Fifth Assembly for Africa', by Byang Kato; 'the actual problem of the Oekumene before and after Nairobi', and 'Nairobi—no turning point', by Peter Beyerhaus; the last two articles clearly show that no correction in the direction of the WCC is enough, but a new beginning is necessary, and hence they recommend that evangelicals separate themselves from the conciliar ecumenical movement.

Two personal comments by the reviewer:-

Professor Beyerhaus writes: 'Jesus has not promised His church that she will consist only of believing Christians—also, Paul has predicted that in the church men will come up who will teach false doctrines and will draw disciples to themselves'. (p.334). Jesus himself gave directions as to how to deal with a brother who has sinned and fallen. Hence the knowledge that the church will never be perfect does not take away our responsibility to strive after a church which consists of believers. Secondly, along with the Professor, I feel the significance of having the Word of God as the supreme basis for our theology and the need to distance ourselves from the so-called scientific higher criticism, otherwise out of a church of believers eventually unbelievers will come. Here a study of the relationship between biblical criticism and unbiblical tendencies in the WCC may turn out to be crucial. An English edition of this book is urgently needed.

# Ethics and Society

## **CAPITALISM AND PROGRESS: A DIAGNOSIS OF WESTERN SOCIETY**

*by Bob Goudzwaard*  
(Eerdmans, USA 1979, Norfolk Press 1980 pp. 270 £4.95)

Abstract of a review by Brian Griffiths in *Churchman* Volume 95, No. 1 1981.

The author of this book is a former member of the Dutch Parliament and currently a professor of economics at the Free University in Amsterdam. Most importantly, he is one of the few Christian [p. 340](#) economists who has thought in depth about the relationship between Christianity and contemporary economic problems. His theme in this book is that the current crisis of Western society can be traced back to the spiritual roots of contemporary western culture. Although the crisis manifests itself in terms of such things as pollution, inflation and the materialism of western man, its basic cause is the fact that the West has defied progress—in the economic sphere the pursuit of gross national product—and subjected its norms of truth and justice to this goal.

The theme is worked out by attempting to show how the transition from feudalism to capitalism accompanied the Renaissance and Enlightenment world-views, the way in which the evolution of modern capitalism (mass production, separation of ownership and control, advertising and the increasing role of government) reflect the secularization of western culture, the inevitable crisis which has followed the pursuit of progress. In the final section he shows the need for a disclosure of society in which he rejects the idea that fate is overcoming western civilization and considers the kind of changes which are necessary to create a more human society.

The book is not intended for economic specialists and makes extremely interesting reading for anyone who is concerned to relate the materialism of our culture to its spiritual roots. It is written from a Dooyeweerdian perspective and contains a great many valuable insights into the history of western society and our current economic problems.

Nevertheless, I have a number of reservations. The indictment of progress is carried so far that it leaves no real place for the creation of wealth; the failure to distinguish capitalism as an 'ism' from the basic institutions of a market economy (private property, free markets and limited government); the lack of a clear biblical basis and the failure to be sufficiently critical about the consequences of the politicization of economic life. If the basic problem of western society is spiritual, then so must be the answer. Hence the demand for social justice must be accompanied by a concern for evangelism.

## **Pastoral Ministry**

### **BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE ART OF PREACHING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

*by* John R. W. Stott

(Hodder and Stoughton, London and William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1982), pp.351, Hard bound \$12.95. [p. 341](#)

Reviewed by Sunand Sumithra

One more remarkable book by the well-known preacher, theologian and writer—this time on homiletics. At a time when the world-culture of our time is fast devaluating, proclamation as a method of mission and evangelism is reduced to service or Christian presence. The author asserts that preaching is indispensable to Christianity. This is more than a book on preaching, it is a reaffirmation of the evangelical distinctives relevant to our time.

The book falls into four natural parts: it starts with a history of preaching, in which the author adequately demonstrates the glory of preaching in church history by apt illustrations. However, one feels the lack of names of Third World preachers, such as Kagawa or D. T. Niles or Sadhu Sunder Singh. The next part is on the theological foundations. Here it is convincingly shown that the necessity for the possibility of preaching is founded on personal convictions about God, the Bible, the church, the pastorate and preaching itself. The calling and the gifts of the Christian minister which are an essential basis for the why of preaching are unfortunately not considered. Then comes the part that seems to be the heart of the book, namely preaching as bridge-building. The chapter explains the rather curious title for a book on homiletics, 'Between Two Worlds'. It is asserted that preaching is a bridge-builder between the Word and the world, between heaven and earth. The usefulness of the book is really in the last section which deals with the 'how' of preaching. Here, Stott deals with the essential aspects of preaching such as the call to study the Word, the preparing of the sermons, and ends up with the spiritual characteristics necessary in a preacher's life, sincerity and earnestness courage and humility. The practical helps, e.g. how to deal with controversial issues, the place of humour in preaching, etc. are clear and most helpful. As Stott himself explains, this book on preaching is not on the techniques of preaching but rather on the theological and personal aspects of it. That is one reason why any budding preacher who goes to the book to find instructions for delivery, elocution, gestures, eye-contact, etc., will be disappointed.

This book is written in a frank but humble manner. Though the style is most readable, the content has unparalleled theological depth—a combination only Stott could achieve! The truth of the many appropriate stories will remain with the reader. Another great strength of the book is its excellent bibliography; having some 200 plus books ranging from the classical (written in 1607) to the modern (written in 1980's), it is a mine of wealth for any preacher. An index of topics and the p.342 persons dealt with would have greatly added to the usefulness of this valuable book.

*Between Two Worlds* is not a replacement for the classical books on homiletics; it is neither a source-book nor a text-book, but a workbook. As such it is a must for every preacher of the Gospel. It is hoped that it will be distributed to the preachers of the two-thirds world at a price suitable to their pocket!

## **Agenda for Renewal**

*Edited by Paul Bowers*  
(Evangel Publishing House, 1982), pp.62.

Reviewed by Kathleen Nicholls

This second booklet in the series *Evangelical Theological Education Today* is a rich mine of reflection on the renewal of evangelical theological education. It consists of five papers given at Malawi, at the second international consultation of the International Council of Accrediting Agencies. Says the editor, 'The contributors were instructed to be stimulative and suggestive rather than academic and technical.' This reviewer considers that they succeeded.



Tokunboh Adeyemo in the keynote address challenged the delegates with the need for a spiritual and Spirit-controlled dimension in the renewal of theological education. He urged that educators make a shift from formal to informal academic structures, to a two-way model of interaction ‘comparable to a hunter inviting his neighbors to feast on game’. He urges training *in* the ministry rather than training *for* the ministry. He states that ‘in academic institutions as in churches, biblical renewal will require not only the Reformation, but also the restoration of the Holy Spirit to His rightful place in the Church.’

Bruce Nicholls provides creative reflection on the topic of spiritual formation in theological education—‘the kind of person we expect the student to become’. The goals of theological education are to produce disciples, those who are willing to serve, who exhibit growth in the knowledge and wisdom of God. A particularly helpful section is that on spiritual development in various contexts—of the theological curriculum, the resident community and the local church. Dr. Nicholls considers that spiritual development *can* be evaluated and has some helpful practical suggestions as to *how*. p. 343

The relation between the need for renewal and the emerging international evangelical accrediting movements in theological education is explored by Paul Bowers in *Accreditation as a Catalyst for Renewal in Theological Education*. Dr. Bowers contends that ‘renewal is integral to the accreditation mandate and that accreditation is a key practical means for implementing that renewal.’ In this renewal three ingredients are required—quality, credibility and collaboration. The traditionalists are told that accreditation *should* be a catalyst for renewal in theological education and the radicalists that it *can* be effectively so.

A fresh and progressive approach to contextualisation is made by Tite Tienou—from the African perspective. Says he, ‘If the theology expounded at the core of a theological curriculum presents itself in alien garb, the whole undertaking is vitiated.’ He compares theologising to translation because both are communication. In the section, *Contextualization: A Process Toward an End*, he says, ‘Contextualization is not the production of theological goods which are marketed to consumers. It is an ever-present process whereby Christians, in their own settings, seek to be disciples of Christ.’ It is the “inner dynamic” of the theological process.

Jim Plueddemann draws on his experience in both Nigeria and the US to stress the urgent need for formulating a theology of theological education! He declares that the task is described and illustrated in every book of the Bible and wonders if its obvious nature causes us to miss it. The goal of theological education is that sin be finally defeated and fellowship restored. A theology of theological education must lead to personal renewal.

May the conversation between evangelical theological educators continue. Cooperation in renewal involves, as Dr. Plueddemann puts it, ‘(demonstrating) that learning is more than an activity limited to the classroom’. The *whole school environment* must be seen as part of the curriculum. p. 344

## Journal Information

### *Publications Referred to in This Issue*

#### **Asian Challenge**

Published by Discipleship Training Centre, 33A Chancery Lane, Singapore, 1130.

**Churchman**

Published by Church Society (Anglican), 186 Kennington Park Road, London, SE11 4BT, England. Rates: £5.50 p.a. (4 issues).

**East Asian Journal of Theology**

Published by the Association for Theological Education in S.E. Asia and the N.E. Asia Association of Theological Schools, 4 Mount Sophia, Singapore 0922, Republic of Singapore. Asia and the Third World \$5.00, elsewhere \$7.00. (2 issues).

**Evangelical Missions Quarterly**

Published by Evangelicals Missions Services Inc., 25W 560 Geneva Road, Box 794, Wheaton Ill. 60187, USA. Rates: \$7.00 p.a. (4 times).

**Faculty Seminar Papers**

Union Biblical Seminary, Bibewadi, Pune 11037, India.

**Faith and Thought**

Published by the Victoria Institute, 29 Queen St., London EC4R ABH England. (3 times).

**Fundamentum**

Journal of the Free Evangelical Theology Academy, Basel, Switzerland. SFr/DM 28.50 per annum.

**Interchange**

Published by AFES Graduates Fellowship, Sydney. 120 Chalmers Street, Surrey Hills 2010, Australia. \$15.00, £7.00.

**International Bulletin of Missionary Research**

Published by Overseas Ministries Centre, P.O. Box 1308-E Fort Lee, New Jersey 07024, USA. Rates: \$9.00 a year (4 issues).

**Perception**

Published by the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar.

**Pulse**

Published by EMIS, Box 794, Wheaton, Ill., 60189, USA. \$25.00 (24 times).

**Scottish Journal of Theology**

Published by the Scottish Academic Press Ltd., 33 Montgomery St., Edinburgh EH7 5JX, Scotland, UK. £12.00 (£22 for institutions) (6 times).